

**THEORIZING RIVAL RHETORICS OF BLACK MATERNITIES: IMAGINING
(RE)PRODUCTIVE LIFE IN SOCIAL DEATH**

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This dissertation considers the ways that Black women navigate the anti-black violence that constrains them, creating social life within social death via their (re)production. The narratives of racial difference embedded within cultural pathology criminalizing Black women’s attempts to “produce properly” has meant that they have had to find creative ways to mother and empower themselves. In de-centering a concern for mothering as biological, this study primarily focuses on the ways Black women mother self via their strategies of self-care. I draw from and speak to the history of Black women’s particular (re)productive struggles to imagine a different kind of rhetorical framework, Black Maternal Futurism (BMF). Black Feminist Studies, Black Queer Studies, and Afro-pessimism & Afro-futurism constitute the theoretical landscape in which I position this project on Black mothering, sexual expression, and (re)production. In imagining rhetoric as “something different,” this project analyzes rhetorics produced by Black women about their mothering to gain a deeper understanding as to how they negotiate a violent, anti-black world.

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PREFACE

I dedicate this dissertation to Black women who have fought, bled, and died to live and thrive in a world built to devalue and destroy them. This dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement of my Advisor, Soror, and friend Dr. Shanara Reid-Brinkley. You have challenged me and pushed me to not only be a better scholar and mentor but to be a better woman. Knowing you and learning from you has truly changed my life. I would like to thank my Soror and friend, Dominique D. Johnson for teaching me so much about what it means to love and support another person through good times, bad times, and all the times in between. I would not have made it through this process without you and for that I will always be grateful. I am beyond proud to call you my Sister. I would also like to thank my co-chair and committee members for their investment in me as a growing scholar and my research. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Janine and Don Stoddard, for their encouragement, wisdom, and love throughout my entire academic journey.

CHAPTER ONE: BLACK MOTHERING, CONTROLLING IMAGES, AND THE ACADEMY

We have to resist injustice and talk back to it, but not at the expense of being well. I don't want to give myself over to the struggle. I don't want to be superwoman in my twenties, strongwoman in my thirties, and suffocated in my forties. We can't let the work (and there is much work to be done) take us out. We have to be mindful how we engage others and ourselves, especially when it comes to obligations and expectations of our time, mind, bodies, thoughts, experiences, and hearts. I don't want to give myself away.¹

In a 2010 interview conducted by Barbara Walters, Oprah Winfrey talks about her life and her personal and professional journey that has led her to a moment in time where she now is launching her own television network, OWN. In celebration of Oprah's career and success, she sits down with Barbara Walters where she is asked very directly about her relationship with her mother and father as it concerns her painful upbringing. When asked about her father, Oprah states plainly, he is fine. And our relationship is fine."² However, when Walters asks her about her parents and whether she sees them and if they are terribly close, Oprah says, "I wouldn't say we are terribly close. I'm grateful that they could do for me what they could for me." Unlike her responses concerning her mother and father, Oprah visibly becomes emotional when asked about her friendship with Gayle King. Oprah says, "She has always been happier for me in everything that's ever happened to me than even I was." Her eyes starting to water, Oprah goes on to say,

¹Crunk Feminist Collective. "How to Not Die: Some Survival Tips for Black Women Who Are Asked to Do Too Much," Crunk Feminist Collective (blog), June 2013, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/06/07/how-to-not-die-some-survival-tips-for-black-women-who-are-asked-to-do-too-much/>.

²Oprah Winfrey, interviewed by Barbara Walters, ABC News: Barbara Walter's Special, December 09, 2010.

“She is the mother I never had. She is the sister everybody would want. She is the friend that everybody deserves. I don’t know a better person. I don’t know a better person...its making me cry cause I’m thinking about how much uh, I have never told her that.”

The conversation Oprah has with Barbara Walters about her friendship with Gayle King complicates anti-black heteronormative, biologically determinant discourses regarding Black women’s mothering practices. While I focus on the ways that Oprah’s comments complicate conventional notions of mothering, my intention is not to diminish the ways she talks about Gayle as a sister and intimate friend “that everybody deserves.” Mothering, for Oprah, in these moments, is not inextricably bound by blood ties and traditional familial relations as she explicitly states that she is not “terribly close” to her parents. Mother, in Oprah’s use speaks not of a biological connection between herself and Gayle rather a kinship these two women established between each other. Oprah complicates Black women’s mothering in her description of Gayle as her mother, sister, and friend. She complicates heteronormative narratives regulating mothering as the mothering she speaks of de-center the importance of blood ties. Oprah’s discussion of her best friend Gayle King prompts opportunity to imagine the ways Black women challenge the time and place in context of violence shaping their everyday lives. Oprah’s contribution on mothering, as I understand her, disrupts time and place as she implicitly questions primary emphasis on biology and blood ties. In de-centering blood ties as the primary relations, Oprah centers kinship ties to describe her friendship with Gayle. In centering the importance of kinship ties, I argue that Oprah generates moments in which she mothers herself in light of the painful childhood.

The biology and heterosexuality embedded within anti-black heteronormative conceptions of mothering foreclose opportunities to consider the complexities of Black women’s

(re)productive lives. It is the assumed biology and heterosexuality associated with mothering and reproduction that aids in dehumanizing and criminalizing Black women in anti-blackness. In challenging mothering as biological and reproduction as heterosexual, I study Black women's literary and public discourses to re-imagine the ways they assert their worth through practices of self-care in anti-black heteropatriarchy. In de-centering a concern for mothering as biological, I center instead a primary focus on the ways Black women mother self via their strategies of self-care. Focusing on the ways Black women strategize mothering themselves does not rule out or prevent a consideration of the struggles associated with rearing children. I contend that in interrogating the ways Black women mother themselves speaks to the complexities of their lives as they question what it means to be human in anti-black heteropatriarchal world.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs discusses the significance of queer Black feminist writers' literary traditions relating these traditions directly to conversation on Black maternity and bodily autonomy.³ She states, "black feminists audaciously centered an entire literary movement around the invocation of this criminal act of black maternity, demanding not only the rights of black women to reproductive autonomy in the biological sense but also in the imperative to create narratives, theories, contexts, collectives, publications, political ideology and more."⁴ I draw from Gumbs' emphasis on Black women's productive and sexual reproductive labor in connection to the criminal act of mothering as it provides space to begin reimagining Black women's mothering in the time and place that subjects them. Black mothering as queer(ed) is a futuristic conception that aids in rereading the ways Black women mother themselves and

³Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves': A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the 'Present', *Gender Forum* 22 (2008), www.org/issues/black-womens-writing-revisited/we-can-learn-to-mother-ourselves.

⁴Ibid., para. 3.

kinship networks.⁵ Their rhetorical practices disrupt authority of anti-black heteronormativity articulated through normative ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and class, queer(ing) the time and space subjecting Black women. I look to Gumbs' work on the queer(ed) Black mother to rethink Black women's reproductive autonomy as something other than biological. The histories detailing the exploitation of Black women's physical and reproductive labor collectively impact the ways they negotiate their lives in anti-blackness. (Re)production, as I refer to it, speaks to interconnectedness of Black women's productive labor and reproductive autonomy. I contend that it is impossible to theorize issues concerning Black women's reproductive autonomy without simultaneously studying the anti-black contexts. It is in these contexts that we gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Black women's lives as their discourses critique assumptive logics that suggest they are unable to "produce properly." Critiquing ideas of mothering and (re)production is necessary in order to deconstruct ideas of race, gender, sexuality, class, and violence, I analyze Black women's discourses as means through which Black women assert their powers of self-definition, self-worth, and self-determination.

Studying Black mothering in strict regard to relationships centered around capitalist ideas of family, heterosexual reproduction, and blood ties, as evidenced in Oprah's comments, miss opportunities to consider various ways Black women mother despite systemic investment in anti-blackness. The purpose of this dissertation is to survey the ways Black women negotiate and thrive within confines of their structural subjection. I analyze Black women's rhetorical practices, reimagining what their discourses reveal about their mothering strategies concerning all that they (re)produce in anti-blackness. This dissertation project theorizes Black mothering by

⁵Critiquing idea of mothering and (re)production necessary in order to deconstruct ideas of race, gender, sexuality, class, and violence, I analyze Black women's discourses as means through which Black women assert their powers of self-definition, self-worth, and self-determination.

imagining the “death of dominant capitalist relations”⁶ that will always subject them. The liberatory nature in imagining the death of these relations for Black women is evident in the ways they find ways to thrive and live their lives in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world. Overall, my study theorizes the “inescapable essentialism” of Black women’s mothering, employing rhetoric to re-imagine ways their strategies delink notions of maternity from the cultural pathology of heterosexual reproduction.⁷ Now, I transition to review trends, patterns, and treatment of Black women’s sexuality and Black maternity in academic scholarship.

Discourses of Black Women’s Sexuality and Black Maternity

Various fields and disciplines including English, Sociology, and Women’s Studies have offered ways to theorize female sexuality and mothering.⁸ While these fields offer insight regarding Black women’s sexuality, I argue that the field of Communication Studies and its interdisciplinary perspectives, methods, and approaches can contribute to these ongoing discussions in a substantial way. However, over the course of my academic journey within the field of Communication Studies, I have identified glaring absences regarding the lack of attention to Black women’s (re)productive lives. A majority of Communication Studies scholarship on Black women’s sexuality works with, not against the global system of anti-black heteronormativity. Additionally, mainstream Black feminist analytic frameworks remain entangled in the politics of anti-black heteronormativity which sustains the image of Black

⁶Alexis Pauline Gumbs, ‘We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves,’ para. 3.

⁷Ibid.

⁸See for other works on mothering and sexuality, see: Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: The Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1978); Sara Rudick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); bell hooks, *Ain’t i a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Carmen Subryan, “Circles: Mother and Daughter Relationships in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon,” *Sage* 5 (1988): 34-36; Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships,” *Sage* 4 (1987): 3-10; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Patricia Bell Scott, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York City: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).

women's bodies as hypervisible, sexualized objects. Such framing fails to critically examine cis-gender heterosexual privilege and the ways it shapes mainstream Black feminist political agendas. More specifically, heterosexual, cis-gender Black women continuously fail to consider the ways that heterosexuality awards them privileges denied to Black queer women and nonbinary femmes.

Black women's sexuality is nuanced and deserves more analysis than is afforded by an explicit focus on binary sexualities. Roderick Ferguson interrogates non-heteronormative arrangements of sexual practices to address the gendered and sexual perversions imposed on Black women's sexuality.⁹ He argues that Black liberal and radical intellectual projects seeking to liberate Black women simultaneously remain complicit in their continued subjection as they fail to address the anti-black heteropatriarchal rubrics of recognition built on the negation of Black flesh. The acknowledgement of Black queer sexualities within (re)productive life is fruitful for *all* Black women. It is fruitful because theorizing Black queer sexualities provides additional perspectives and techniques to disrupt the normative flow of power in anti-blackness.

African American culture, as argued by Ferguson, is negated through anti-black heteropatriarchy via norms regulating heterosexuality and patriarchy.¹⁰ Patriarchy alone, I contend, is not equipped to fully speak to global systems of sexual privilege nor their articulation through racialized discourses. Heterosexuality, as positioned within the socio-political system of anti-black heteronormativity, remains an unspoken sexual norm. Important here is the idea that anti-black heteropatriarchy only sees heterosexuality as natural and normal.¹¹ African American sexuality is written into anti-black heteropatriarchy as the antagonistic counterpart of white

⁹Roderick Ferguson, *Abberations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

heterosexuality. This means that the particularities of normative heteropatriarchy are mobilized through racialized discourses as articulated through notions of gender and sexual deviance. Heterosexual, cis-gender Black women's treatment of Black queer women in Black feminist spaces present critical spaces to consider implications of these absences on all Black women. Black lesbians, for instance, are characterized as deviant and dangerous through their perceived rejection of performing white heterosexuality.¹² Heterosexual, cis-gender Black women who reject Black lesbians as being inauthentically Black (due to the perception that being gay was assumed to be a "white peoples' disease"), do so on the grounds that Black lesbians represent a threat to Black Nationhood.¹³ In trying to gain acceptance from dominant anti-black heteropatriarchy, heterosexual cis-gender Black women herald heterosexuality as the natural order of things, as far as relation and family goes (which also remain heteronormatively conceived).

African American's sexuality is written, or recognized in anti-black heteropatriarchy as the extreme opposite of white heterosexuality.¹⁴ Black feminist theories advocating for the transformation of Black women's sexual agency (while understandable) remains problematic in that heterosexuality is never substantially acknowledged as privileged in anti-black heteropatriarchy.¹⁵ Strands of Black feminist theory dominated by heteronormative middle class politics of respectability, while committed to challenging the white social imaginary's perception

¹²Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York, Taylor and Francis, 2005).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴For more on African American sexuality, see: Roderick Ferguson, *Abberations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Davis, Dána-Ain and Shaka McGlotten, *Black Genders and Sexualities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁵Although accountability may be taken up by individuals, the theoretical landscape of Black Feminist Studies, in my perspective, has yet to substantially deal with homoantagonisms embedded within its theories, frameworks, concepts, and practices. Of course, some Black feminist organizations such as the Combahee River Collective have spoken about the homophobia that undergirds Black feminists discourses. However, I don't read these moments as resolving or "fixing" the issues that they see fit to address.

of Black women as deviant and criminal, fail to critically examine their own sexual privilege, the ways that it shapes their Black feminist political agendas, and the implications of their politics on Black queer women and nonbinary femmes. The visibility of Black heterosexuality, at the expense of Black queer sexualities, re-instantiate characterizations of Black queer sexualities which are presumed to represent disorder and chaos, thus, they are “abnormal.” In dominant Black feminist rhetorics, sexuality is a topic that usually speaks to sexual deviancy in reference to heterosexual Black women.¹⁶ In effort to present themselves as “good Black women,” these women attempt to mirror practices sanctioned by anti-black heteropatriarchy. They see themselves as “good” because they abide by anti-black heteropatriarchal norms and expectations that control discourses and politics of sexuality. In doing so, heterosexual, cis-gender campaigns for political agency, and rights to self-determination through Black feminist discourses continues to render Black queer women as “bad.” Again, the designation of “good” and “bad” Black women (as it pertains to practice and performance of sexuality) is read through binary of heterosexual vs. homosexual in anti-black heteronormativity. Despite intentions to align with dominant anti-black heteropatriarchy, the lack of reflexivity regarding the exclusion of Black queer women, impacts all Black women.

Heterosexual, cis-gender Black feminists continuously miss opportunities to consider the ways that their sexuality awards them privileges denied to Black queer women and nonbinary femmes. Failing to mark heterosexuality, as situated in the structural system of anti-black heteronormativity, upholds the perception of heterosexual and Black queer women as sexually deviant. Through perversions of gender and sexuality imposed on all Black bodies, anti-black heteropatriarchy gleans its coherence, power, and authority. It is important to consistently name

¹⁶This of course does not mean that Black Lesbians and Black Queer persons were not talking publicly about their sexuality, quite the contrary. Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Barbara Smith among many others made it their life’s work to speak out on the homophobia that was rampant among Black women.

and critique systems of sexual privilege that heterosexual, cis-gender Black women benefit from at the expense of Black queer women. Therefore, I identify two limitations in theorizing Black women's sexuality within Black feminist studies.

The *first* limitation is that Black feminist theories on sexuality fail to acknowledge and mark the sets of sexual practices, arrangements, and privileges that these analyses are built on. In Collins' book, *Black Feminist Thought*, she calls attention to how controlling images justify the treatment of heterosexual Black women as sexual objects, accessible to white Supremacist culture for their pleasure and enjoyment.¹⁷ Her work on controlling images addresses how the white social imaginary perceives (heterosexual) Black women as criminal and irresponsible, which stifles the potential for them to be recognized, understood, and approached in any other way. Although Collins' work is valuable in preliminarily thinking through the media's role in naturalizing these images, she simultaneously fails to explicitly and consistently mark the specific sets of sexual practices that her controlling images focus on. For instance, the jezebel image, refers to the perceived excessive, hypersexual nature of Black women which aids anti-black heteropatriarchy's characterization of Black women as sexually deviant. How do we come to understand heterosexual, cis-gender Black women as deviant, recognizing this deviancy is in fact socially constructed? The question for me becomes, but whose sexuality are we speaking about? While Collins makes isolated references to Black lesbians, the sense that I get from her work is that it is only acceptable to discuss Black lesbians in particular contexts, i.e., sisterhood and friendship. While these images shed light on the operational dynamics of anti-black heteropatriarchy, they make no mention of Black queer (women's) bodies excluded from their analyses. It is not to say that Black queer women are not impacted by these images; however, I

¹⁷Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

would say that the implications of these images on their bodies is left unexplored. In other words, Black queer women's bodies are hyper-sexualized however the ways that sexual deviancy is mapped and enforced on their bodies manifest differently.

The *second* limitation deals largely with the failure of scholarship to mark the system of anti-black heteropatriarchy, not patriarchy, in examining Black women's sexuality and how that impacts Black queer women and nonbinary femmes. How does the normative treatment of Black women's sexuality regulate Black queer women's through absence and silence (hidden in plain sight)? In Eric King Watts essay, "The Female Voice in Hip Hop: An Exploration into the Potential of the Erotic Appeal," he argues that the erotic is threatened by mass (white) consumer culture.¹⁸ This consumer culture perceives and appropriates (heterosexual) Black women's bodies as sites through which sexual fantasies and normative sexual taboos are projected onto the body. This is an important contribution of Watts' work as he interrogates the sexual objectification of (heterosexual) Black women as excessively heterosexual, as always already willing. Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic helps him, to a certain degree, review how Black women rhetorically negotiate patriarchal dominated spaces in hip hop communities.¹⁹ Black women assert themselves as erotic beings *deserving of fullness and the capacity to love* as they navigate themselves in these dominant spaces. To a certain extent, we can read Watts as engaging in radical work as he argues that Black women are active agents of their sexual desires despite patriarchal constraints. His treatment of Black women's sexuality, however well intentioned, does not mark the certain privileges that come along with heterosexuality until the very end of essay. In that, he does not allocate adequate space to consider how an analysis of

¹⁸Eric King Watts, "The Female Voice in Hip Hop: An Exploration into the Potential of the Erotic Appeal," *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse*, eds. M. Houston & O. I. Davis (Cresskill: Hampton Press Inc., 2002), 187-213.

¹⁹Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & speeches* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1978).

Black queer sexualities complements and complicates his central argument. The difference between white patriarchy and anti-black patriarchy, I argue, is insufficient in addressing the sexual systems that grant privileges to heterosexual Black women over Black queer women. In resituating analyses like Watts within a frame that acknowledges anti-black capitalist relations we are better equipped to interrogate the complexities of Black women's sexualities.

Watts' reading of Black women's empowering seizure of male dominated spaces in hip hop communities is limited because it does not disrupt heteronormative production of Black women as sexually deviant; moreover, the lack of consideration concerning Black queer women and nonbinary femmes whose sexual livelihood is maintained as abnormal. This means, for me, that rhetorical scholars must attend to the discourses on Black (women's) sexual deviancy and how these discourses are imposed for different purposes on different Black female bodies.

Despite heterosexual, cis-gender Black women's alignment with anti-black heteropatriarchal norms and their distancing from Black queer women, their bodies are *still* read as deviant. In trying to gain acceptance from anti-black heteropatriarchy, heterosexual, cis-gender Black women reinforce the naturalization of heterosexuality as representing the natural order of things, as far as relation and family goes (which also remain heteronormatively conceived).

Theorizations of Black women's sexuality must mark the system of anti-black heteronormativity and the ruling order of heteropatriarchy as heterosexual, cis-gender within this systemic order.

To be sure, simply naming these practices is not enough. The perceived deviancy of Black women's sexuality has a profound impact, I argue, on the ways heteronormative reproductive rights discourses materialize in the contemporary political sphere. Therefore attending to the complexity of Black women's sexuality is important as, I argue, these critiques of sexuality lend themselves to beginning to envision Black mothering as sites of structural impossibility. In the

field of Communication Studies, examinations of mothering, within rhetorical studies, occur largely in the context of abortion rhetoric.

Spotlight on Communication Studies, U.S. Abortion Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Mothering

Communication scholarship has significantly contributed to our understanding of abortion rhetoric. However, the field of Communication has yet to answer the call for complex rhetorical examinations on reproductive justice that move beyond the abortion debates and historicizing social and political contexts that contribute to economic inequalities that women of color face in contemporary society. This is important work as it allows rhetorical studies to begin compiling and investigating the contexts that inform discussions and debates on reproductive issues and maternity. The U.S. abortion debate remains heated because it virtually is a disagreement over a basic tenet of our society that ensures the survival of anti-blackness, and by extension the white sovereign subject's authority. The political atmosphere during fears of white degeneration no doubt intensified after *Roe v. Wade*, a groundbreaking case that made the 20th century a popular period for scholarly inquiry regarding abortion.²⁰ 20th century abortion policies have received attention from a variety of fields including law, medicine, and communication studies.

Communication scholars such as Randall Lake, Celeste Condit, Sara Hayden, and Nathan Stormer among others have studied abortion discourse, identifying areas in need of further research.²¹ Due to the "argumentative complexity" and exclusion of abortion discourse, pro-life and pro-choice groups have become discursively entrenched in hopes of "winning" the abortion

²⁰113. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S (1973).

²¹Randall A. Lake, "The Metaethical Framework of Anti-abortion Rhetoric," *Signs* 11 (1986); Celeste Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Sara Hayden, "Family Metaphors and the Nation: Promoting a Politics of Care through the Million Mom March," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003); Nathan Stormer, *Articulating Life's Memory: U.S. Medical Rhetoric about Abortion in the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003).

war.²² This entrenchment has become the center of the debate in rhetorical studies within the field of Communication Studies. Condit has contributed several significant works on abortion rhetoric to the field of Communication Studies.²³ Condit examines the persuasive strategies of abortion rhetoric to providing a basic understanding of how it functions. She identifies seven avenues through which abortion has been studied some of which include – rhetoric and narrative, rhetoric and image, rhetoric and law, and rhetoric and values. Condit does this in order to identify the different lenses that have been used to academically study abortion rhetoric. These strategies, according to Condit, are a way to explicate how rhetoric has shaped current legal and cultural practices. Her work is significant to rhetorical scholarship and my research as she provides a basic understanding regarding the political and social discourses that inform social perceptions of women as mothers.

Within the field, mothering has received some attention as it pertains to the negotiation of it as an identity central to women’s lives and their relationships with others.²⁴ Sara Hayden’s rhetorical scholarship, for instance, addresses politicized nature of motherhood as she analyzes abortion rhetoric, pro-choice movements, and movements concerning the mobilization of mothers. Her work contributes to the field in this regard as she employs rhetorical methods to

²¹Michele Dillon, “Argumentative Complexity of Abortion Discourse,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1993): 305-314.

²²Celeste Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

²³See for other works on mothering in the field of Communication Studies: Valeria Fabj, “Motherhood as Political Voice: The Rhetoric of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” *Communication Studies* 44 (1993): 1-18; Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lynn M. Stearny, “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal,” *Communication Quarterly* 42 (1994): 145-159; Hilary S. Crew, “Feminist Theories and the Voices of Mothers and Daughters in Selected African-American Literature for Young Adults,” *African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation* (1994): 79-114; Mari Boor Tonn, “Militant Motherhood: Labor Mary Harris ‘Mother’ Jones,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1996): 1-21; Claudia Bernard, *Constructing Lived Experiences: Representations of Black Mothers in Child Abuse Discourses* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Robin M. Boylorn, “Southern Black Women: Their Lived Realities (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2009); Alexis C. Dennis and Julia T. Wood, “‘We’re Not Going To Have This Conversation, But You Get It’: Black Mother-Daughter Communication About Sexual Relations,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 35 (2012): 204-223.

frame her investigations into the politics of motherhood and reproduction. Despite a growing interest in mothering and rhetoric as an area of study, there is still little work that attends to the intersections of sexuality, mothering, and reproductive autonomy within rhetorical studies on and about Black women. Some of the research in the field has studied Black women's mothering practices concerning their social relationships as well as the political contexts that inform anti-Black heteronormative conceptions of Black mothering. I briefly mention Hayden's essay concerning the rhetorical efficacy of familial metaphors that stress the importance and central-ness of mothers in securing the well-being of their children and society at large.²⁵

Hayden's work on the family and motherhood, as explicated through George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's conceptual understanding of metaphor, addresses the rhetorical efficacy of mothers who advocate for the political platforms necessary to protect their children.²⁶ Implicit in Hayden's posturing of maternity is the assumed and perceived responsibility of mothers to afford their children with the necessary protections from harm and danger. In addition, her examination of the "family as nation" operates to better situate mothers' political agency (albeit for good intentions) which assumes a relationship between mothers and the state. The Million Moms March, which served as the central case study for her analysis, highlights the ways this movement centers its concern for political efficacy strictly in relation to the state. On the one hand, it is important to validate these mothers' efforts to gain the political platforms necessary to express their concerns regarding their children's safety. On the other hand, the analysis offered through the metaphor, family as nation, leaves something to be desired. Or rather, what I mean to suggest is that, Hayden's characterization and analysis of the Million Moms March rally continues to ignore the central-ness of race. Of course, Hayden makes brief mentioning of

²⁴Sara Hayden, "Family Metaphors and the Nation: Promoting a Politics of Care through the Million Mom March," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003).

²⁵George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

African American mothers in the typical contexts regarding to disadvantaged mothers, poor Black mothers who are simply victim to the conditions that control their lives.

Hayden presents motherhood as a disruptive space, using African American mothers and white lesbian mothers to reinforce her case. To stress this point, Hayden employs Rosie O'Donnell's public discussion of choice to center her life, as mother, on her kids. Reflecting on O'Donnell as an example to consider the efficacy of choice as maternal appeal for gender politics, Hayden states:

O'Donnell is more than a representative example. She explicitly acknowledges the diversity of the participants in the rally, insisting that maternal practices are being enacted by people from widely divergent backgrounds. 'We are young, old, rich, and poor. We are men, women, and children demanding to be counted,' and she credits all members of the march as giving birth to a movement (209).²⁷

In this excerpt, Hayden uses O'Donnell's testimony to draw connections between the social identities of rally participants and the perceived openness of maternity to all women despite race, sexuality, or class identities. O'Donnell's viewpoint and Hayden's interpretation of O'Donnell ignore the central-ness of race. For Black mothers, protection and survival requires a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the historical, structural, and socio-political contexts that Black women were not meant to survive. Even in engaging issues of gender, I am unsure how such a feat can be possible if rhetorical scholars do not attend to the racial logics embedded into our conception and treatment of gender. Race is not a special topic that can be inserted and removed depending on whether or not a scholar wants to deal with the "race issue." Mentioning African American mothers and white lesbian mothers particular struggles concerning motherhood are

²⁶Sara Hayden, "Revitalizing the Debate Between <Life> and <Choice>: The 2004 March for Women's Lives," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009): 111-131.

appropriated and conflated to obfuscate the central-ness of race in gender politics. In other words, I see Black and (white) lesbian mothers' experiences as anecdotes to bolster white mothers' political agendas.

Even with Hayden's mention of African American mothers and lesbian mothers, her recognition of them does not, from my perspective, disrupt the authority of anti-Black heteronormativity in ways that would benefit these particular groups of mothers. Here, I contend that Hayden's work strengthens anti-black heteronormativity's claims on Black women's bodies, particularly Black queer woman bodies including Black queer and Black Trans folks as their interiorities remain unexplored. How can we understand motherhood as a space in which all women can occupy if the anti-black heteronormative logics that govern discourses of maternity, reproduction, and family remain untroubled? I do not believe that the inclusion of marginalized bodies as case studies and examples necessarily means that rhetorical scholars are actually *theorizing* about race. Hayden's work is important as it provides a foundation through which to think through the complex relationship between Black women's sexuality and maternity as it impacts considerations of (re)productive life. However, the elision of race in Hayden's essay on maternity and reproduction, provide necessary space for my project to begin filling these gaps in the field.

Relationship to Literature

Black Feminist Studies, Black Queer Studies, and Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism constitute the theoretical landscape in which I position my dissertation on Black mothering, sexual expression, and (re)production. I situate Black Feminist studies and Black Queer Studies within the contexts cultivated by Afro-pessimist and Afro-futurist scholarship to call attention to the implicit American grammar of Black suffering that structures Black women's subjection. Black Queer studies offers valuable critiques of anti-Black heteronormativity and the systems of

heteropatriarchy that normalize heterosexuality as the natural expression of sexual erotic desire. Even the ways that we mark heterosexuality does so from a heteronormative frame that secures and ensures the subjection of all Black female bodies, not just some. Black Queer studies assists my project in disrupting the anti-black heteronormative ideologies and logics that link Black motherhood to heterosexual sex within capitalist formations that, I argue, exclude Black queer and nonbinary femmes from conceptions of Black maternity. Overall, I pull from these areas of scholarship to disrupt the assumptive anti-black logics that associate Blackness with death, violence, and unproductivity (as “unable to produce properly”).²⁸ From here, I spend time unpacking these areas of scholarship, citing scholars whose efforts contribute to the theoretical depth and scope of my project.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory is a social theory derivative of the humanist tradition that emphasizes the importance of the communicative lives of Black women. This body of scholarship generated by and for Black women is useful in rhetorically analyzing Black mothering and the political landscape of reproductive rights. I find this particularly the case because as it centers the lives of Black women while simultaneously de-centering anti-black heteropatriarchy, producing scholarship concerning the complexity of their struggles in the white imaginary social world. Rhetorically, these theories claim necessary space in rhetorical studies to study the contributions of Black women as communicated through discourses addressing the structural oppression they experience every day. The field of Communication Studies, although seemingly built on experiences and thoughts of old, white, male elites, must be expanded to consider a plethora of experiences and thoughts mobilized from a number of sites; this is, as opposed, to funneling our knowledge of communication, rhetoric, and motherhood through a

²⁸Alexis Pauline Gumbs, ‘We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves,’ para. 3.

limited scope which historically has prevented Black women's testimonies from being seen as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Analyzing the public lives and discourses of Black women who speak out against the injustices they face every day is incredibly important to rhetorical studies as their contributions highlight the ways rhetoric (or the act of speaking in public) reveal relations of power. Marsha Houston and Olga I. Davis speak to this notion directly in their edited volume, *Centering Ourselves*, where they advocate for more interrogations into the communicatively lived experiences of Black women and what they can teach us not only about rhetoric but the world they live in.²⁹ The focus on social justice and human equality is central to Black feminist studies as it challenges the structures that discredit, de-legitimize, and deny Black women the subjecthood necessary to gain control over their lives. In examining the various ways that Black women lay rhetorical claims to political and sexual agency, Black feminist studies centers the material, personal and the intellectual to combat social oppression and violence.

The politics of respectability around sexuality in Black feminist theory raise troublesome issues that not only pertain to class privilege but heterosexual privilege reaped from system of anti-black heteronormativity. The empowering aspects of Black women's public and private discourse provide opportunities for creative exchange as well as to mobilize collectives to produce change through shared political agendas. The internal politics involved in organizing and mobilizing collectives demonstrate some of the tear down factors because rhetoric is employed as a tool to regulate which performances of Black womanhood are seen as productive in gaining respect and rights from white heteronormative society. E. Frances White tackles this issues directly in her book on the politics of respectability and the damage it does to individual

²⁸Marsha Houston and Olga Idriss Davis, "Introduction: A Black Women's Angle of Vision on Communication Studies," *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse*, ed. M. Houston and O. I. Davis (Cresskill: Hampton Press Inc., 2002), 1-18.

Black women as well sustainability of Black women's organizing.³⁰ To be clear, I employ Black feminist theory, drawing from the collective strength, ingenuity, and bravery of Black women actively working to transform the world, while simultaneously dis-identifying with dominant strands of Black feminist theory that remain complicit in anti-black heteronormativity.

Black Queer Studies

Black Queer Studies is a transdisciplinary area of study, dedicated to critiquing heteronormative, nationalist conceptions of Blackness that exclude a consideration of Black queer sexualities. Situated within and extending beyond Black Cultural Studies, Black Queer Studies fiercely interrogates the homoantagonisms produced within nationalist notions of Blackness that impose gratuitous violence on Black queer bodies in the name of Black solidarity. I appeal to this area of studies for its efforts in imagining the death of the anti-black capitalist relations contributing to Black women's (dis)possession articulated through gender and sexual normativity. Black Queer Studies moves beyond simply identifying the politics of respectability regulating African American culture to examine the nature of language and discourse as sites of struggle. Considering the absences regarding Black queer folks in both Black Cultural Studies and Black Feminist Studies, Black Queer Studies critically attends to these absences while also thinking of new ways to generate and produce knowledge and the bodies in it. This area of scholarship is invaluable to the field of Communication Studies as it offers nuanced theories of sexualities that move beyond concerns of sexual agency for heterosexual Black subjects to think about how such efforts impact Black queer folks. Despite the recognition of Black Queer Studies within the discipline, E. Patrick Johnson reminds us that the politics of the field is still an

²⁹E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

ongoing issue regardless of the increase in research pertaining to Black queer sexualities.³¹ In doing so, Black Queer Studies creates opportunities to challenge anti-black nationalist, heteropatriarchal, misogynistic notions of blackness through investigations into the nuances and complexities of Black queer sexualities. For instance, Brody and McBride trouble nationalist notions of blackness, which abject Black queer bodies, to enable broader notions of blackness worldwide to challenge anti-black heteropatriarchal rubrics of recognition.³²

These rubrics function as logics that shape Black Nationalist and Cultural studies discourse focus on the authenticity of Blackness and who can be counted. In this way, Black Queer Studies research offers opportunities, when in conversation with Black feminist studies and Afro-pessimist/futurist studies, to consider the “*what*” constitutes blackness and not “*who*” constitutes Blackness.³³ In focusing on the “*what*” over “*who*” necessitates examinations into the conditions and mechanisms through which Black queer bodies are scripted as “*abnormal*.” In this way, we can understand Black Queer Studies as fundamentally opposed to reducing Blackness to an identity that precludes and therefore, excludes Black queer women and nonbinary femmes. The landscape of Black Queer Studies via these conceptual, theoretical, and methodological spaces, offer alternative ways to re-imagine the relationship across discourses of sexualities, questions of the bodily subjectivities, and considerations of language and temporality.

Afro-pessimism & Afro-futurism

Afro-pessimism, or futurism is an area of study invested in interrogating the structural conditions of impossibility concerning Black (women’s) subjectivities. Subjectivity, as a

³⁰E. Patrick Johnson, “To be Young, Gifted, and Queer.” *Race and Sex in the New Black Studies*, *The Black Scholar* 44 (2014): 50-58.

³¹Brody, J. D., Plum nelly: New Essays in Black Queer Studies: Introduction, *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 285-288.

³²Dominique D. Johnson, “When the Rainbow is Not Enuf: Activism & the Everyday in London’s Black Gay and Lesbian Activist Ephemera.” presentation (Agora) at University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA., March 20, 2015. I pull from Dominique D. Johnson’s spring 2015 Agora presentation and her interest in interrogating the “*what*” is Blackness as opposed to solely focusing on the “*who*” is counted in Blackness.

framework through which to re-evaluate the status of humanity in liberal and radical discourses, becomes the driving force, or logic, behind why these concepts are significant to closely interrogate. In other words, examining the theoretical assumptions associated with subjectivity present new (im)possibilities to imagine social life within social death. Moreover, this broad area of study remains committed to interrogating the epistemology of enslavement that undergirds Modern conceptions of subjectivity in the context of anti-blackness.³⁴ Unlike Black Cultural Studies and Black Feminist Studies, Afro-pessimism/futurism's subject of study is anti-blackness, not Blackness. This difference is important as Black Cultural Studies is oriented around examining the "who" and not the "what" of Blackness in anti-black heteronormativity. In focusing on the "what" of Afro-pessimism, these scholars aim to investigate the structural antagonisms that inform our understanding of how we come to understand there to be a "who" associated with Blackness.

For Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Frank Moten, Frank B. Wilderson, and Jared A. Sexton, the focus seems to be on examining the structures and fluid mechanics of (white) Humanity enabled by the subjection of Black flesh. In examining the nuances of anti-blackness doesn't mean that we are talking solely about Black bodies. Moving beyond characterizations of Blackness strictly in terms of identity, Blackness in these contexts works as a structural adjective. Watts explains, "The Black names the condition of state violence, a flesh-object brought into the world for 'accumulation and fungibility.'"³⁵ The Black is essential to the production of Western subjectivity and to notions of what it means to be human" (276). Here, Watts draws attention to the ways that "the Black" as structural adjective, as subject position,

³⁴See for more on the epistemology of enslavement: Sabine Broeck, "Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology through Black Feminist Critique," *Gender Forum* 22, (2008): 1-4.

³⁵Eric King Watts, "Critical Cosmopolitanism, Antagonism, and Social Suffering," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2002): 271-279.

provides the foundation on which the white modern world thrives.³⁶ What does it mean to be a Black subject in a white invented world where the only system or frames we have to consider Black bodies is through white constructed frames of thought? How does that limit how we can then intellectually theorize about liberating or freeing a Black subject when these subjects were invented and thought to always already be enslaved? These questions, among a plethora of others, help constitute Afro-pessimism as a significant area of study.

The study of Afro-pessimism, similar to Black Queer Studies, employs race as its central concern, interrogating the ways race always already intersects and interacts with the, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, nationality and immigration status in a capitalist ordered world. This is not to say that sexuality and gender are somehow less relevant however it is to say that racial subjectivities are articulated through deviant discourses of gender and sexuality. This particular approach looks to examine the conditions of structural impossibility that Black bodies find themselves forced to navigate through a centralized focus on race. Here, racial discourses articulate and reinforce notions of gender differentiation and sexual deviance. The whitewashing of these categories is problematic when theorizing about Black subjects as they are already excluded from consideration of such categories. In other words, Black bodies inform the invention of such categories but are not thought to actually occupy said categories. For Afro-pessimists and Afro-futurists then, this speaks to the perceived limitations of Black feminist theory and additional liberal and radical intellectual projects that argue that Black people have transcended the ontological status as Slave. Now, I transition to highlight the ways academic scholarship concerning U.S. Reproductive Rights Movement overlooks the complexity of Black women's (re)productive struggles in intimate state violence.

³⁵Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Spotlight on the Academy and the U.S Reproductive Rights Movement

In 2013 and 2014, *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies* ran two special issues on reproductive justice highlighting the structural impediments that impact women's political and individual access to agency and choice. Although *Frontiers'* is not disciplinarily grounded in rhetoric and rhetorical studies, its treatment of Black women's (re)productivity highlights the anti-black contexts that impact Black women's mothering. The 2013 issue focused on various complex experiences concerning women of color, expanding the scope of what counts as reproductive rights. A number of reproductive concerns covered in this issue include abortion, birth control, egg donation, gestational surrogacy, and in vitro fertilization. The 2014 issue was explicitly organized around issues of (hetero)sexual reproduction, motherhood, and sexual expression. The thematic focus of the 2014 special issue is important to note considering the ways that disconnected discussions concerning these issues, in relationship to reproductive rights, often take place in the field of Communication Studies. Black women's historically documented struggles, for instance, with reproduction and maternity as it intersects with discourses of Black women's sexuality have been understudied in rhetorical studies. I will have more to say concerning the academic landscape regarding mothering and reproduction shortly, but for now I spend more time discussing the strengths and limitations of *Frontiers'* special issues.

These special issues, prompt moments for rhetorical scholars to critically reflect on the absences that continue to overlook and undermine the importance of studying Black women's historically situated struggles with their reproduction. A number of disciplines such as Sociology, English, Law/Political Science, and Black Cultural Studies have witnessed a growing interest, however small and isolated, in addressing how racial constructs inform the oppressive conditions in which Black women find themselves. These disciplines have generated important

scholarship historicizing and critiquing Black women's interactions with the State concerning their mothering and reproductive autonomy. In acknowledging the growing interest in studying mothering and (re)production present opportunities to examine Black women's intergenerational struggle for (re)productive life in anti-black heteronormativity.

In Mytheli Sreenivas' introduction for *Frontiers'* special issue, she frames her examination on reproductive rights and women of color explicitly around abortion.³⁷ Although not without its issues, the focus on abortion is understandable considering that the issue was put together to commemorate the 40th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. This case, believed to be a victory for feminists, has now ushered society into what is regarded as the "era of choice."³⁸ In recognizing the historically symbolic importance of this landmark case in American politics, Sreenivas uses this anniversary to call attention to the increasing number of anti-abortion measures looking to undermine the precedent *Roe v. Wade* is understood to set. She states:

The year 2013 marks the fortieth anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, *Roe v. Wade*. This year has also witnessed the passage in Arkansas, North Dakota, Ohio, and Texas of some of the most restrictive legislation on abortion in the United States. Some of this legislation directly contradicts *Roe's* establishment of a woman's right to abortion until fetal viability (typically around twenty-four weeks) by banning abortions after a fetal heartbeat can be detected via ultrasound. Other new laws attack women's access to abortion by creating licensing requirements that make it difficult, if not impossible, for abortion clinics to operate. Although some new legislation

³⁷Mytheli Sreenivas, Introduction, *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies* 34 (2013): xii-xiv.

³⁸Sara Hayden and Lynn O. Hallstein, *Contemplating maternity in an era of choice: Explorations into discourses of reproduction*. (Lanham: Lexington Books).

has already been overturned in the courts, this proliferation of anti-abortion measures highlights a central tension in U.S. reproductive politics in the forty years since Roe.³⁹ Although she frames this issue around abortion rights, Sreenivas looks to expand the scope of reproductive issues that women of color confront in their everyday lives. The implications of framing this issue around Roe v. Wade and abortion rights, I argue, has substantial implications for Black women. One major implication in centering discussions of reproductive rights on Roe v. Wade, for Black women, is that it only tells part of the story. In other words, lack of attention on the historical contexts pre- Roe v. Wade, I contend, strengthens anti-black heteronormativity's claims on Black women's bodies. I forward this claim arguing that the absences surrounding Black women's bodies, particularly in regards to sexuality, maternity, and reproductive "rights," endorse assumptive logics that enable white feminists and white female maternal activists to benefit from Black women's visibility within the U.S. reproductive rights movement.

Susatha Jesuda and Katrina Kimport offer an intersectional examination to consider the ways that women of color negotiate reproductive rights as they pertain to reproductive technologies.⁴⁰ Moreover, their efforts address the multi-dimensional nature of reproductive justice as a legitimate area of academic research. The authors offer a subtle distinction between reproductive rights and reproductive justice, identifying reproductive justice as their preferred methodological framework. Jesuda and Kimport state:

In contrast to a reproductive rights approach, which focuses on an individual rights-based model of understanding and advocacy, reproductive justice includes

³⁹Mytheli Sreenivas, Introduction, vii.

⁴⁰Susatha Jesuda and Katrina Kimport, Decentering the Individual and Centering Community: Using a Reproductive Justice Methodology to Examine the Uses of Reprogenetics, *Frontiers Journal of Women's Studies* 34 (2013): 213-225.

an analysis of the social, political, economic, and historic contexts within which these technologies are being deployed.⁴¹

Their emphasis on “justice” over “rights” aims to avoid discussing issues of reproduction in ways that center the individual at the expense of a consideration of women of color collectively. Reproductive justice, then, for Jesuda and Kimport, is a methodological framework that enables critiques of the relations of power that constrain women of color’s political agency. The decision to focus on justice over rights, for Black women, forecloses opportunities to interrogate the structural antagonisms embedded within such an approach. Black feminist criticisms of the mainstream U.S. reproductive rights movement assert that focusing solely on abortion fails to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of reproductive justice for Black women particularly. For Black women, the expansion of topics beyond abortion is critical as argued by Black women’s reproductive justice organizations such as Pittsburgh New Voices, SisterSong, National Black Women’s Health Project, SisterLove, and SPARK Reproductive Justice Now who contend that reproductive rights cannot stay a single issue movement. However, the continued treatment of Black women, their lived experiences, and their bodies as “invisible” within white Western academia speak to larger instantiations of power.

In *Frontiers*’ 2014 special issue, Jennifer Denbow offers an understanding of reproductive freedom through the conceptual framework, *sterilization as cyborg performance*. Denbow contends that:

Sterilization as a performance that has the potential to disrupt associations of womanhood with motherhood. I also argue that the sterilized body can be read as a cyborg figure that subverts not just the idea of women as inevitably maternal, but also widespread binary notions of woman-man, nature-culture, and organism-machine.

⁴¹Ibid., 213.

Relying on cyborg theory allows for an examination of issues of the body and technology that are often left out of research on nonreproduction, but that are crucial to consider if the identification of women's bodies with reproductive desire is to be subverted (109).⁴² Her work on the cyborg is beneficial to feminist theorizations of subjectivity in that it provides a metaphor to critique the normative constraints imposed on gendered identities as the only way in which lived experience can be understood. Donna Haraway notes that the cyborg is "a creature in a post-gender world" (150) which acts as our political ontology which means that we are in fact cyborgs ourselves.⁴³ In this way, Denbow wishes to disrupt anti-black heteropatriarchal inventions of gender through her analysis on the cyborg in relation to "childless women." She argues, "Although the sterilized body does not self-regulate in the way that Haraway describes machine-organism hybrids, the cyborg is nonetheless a useful figure for examining sterilization...destabilizing prevailing constructions of women, the sterilized woman may contribute to an opening up of greater possibilities".⁴⁴ In this excerpt, Denbow argues that the sterilization, vis-à-vis cyborg theory, possesses potential to transform dominant cultural narratives regarding reproduction. In so doing, she is invested in disrupting gender binaries as well as disrupting the notion that female body has inherent value through its capacity to reproduce.

If we imagine a world without gender in order to consider cyborgs as potential site of transformative agency, we end up imagining a world where Black women cannot exist. To theorize the cyborg in a post-gender technological reality does not disrupt the current regime, it re-constitutes the system. In part because, as Sabine Broeck argues, *de-gendering* is a process

⁴²Jennifer Denbow, "Sterilization as Cyborg Performance: Reproductive Freedom and the Regulation of Sterilization," *Frontiers Journal of Women's Studies* 34 (2014): 107-131.

⁴³Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: An Outline* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴⁴Jennifer Denbow, "Sterilization as cyborg performance: Reproductive Freedom and the Regulation of Sterilization," *Frontiers Journal of Women's Studies* 34 (2014): 118-119.

that ontologically characterizes Black flesh as fleshly commodities who are then unable to occupy the modern notion of Human.⁴⁵ In imagining a world without gender, we should remain committed to interrogating the ways that gender functions ontologically to (re)enslave Black women. In other words, theoretically imagining a world without gender, albeit theoretically, does not mean that the normative processes of dehumanization of Black people stop.

The cyborg, as theorized in this way, does not resolve the structural and social dilemmas of Black (women's) bodies in white Western Modernity. I do not believe the answer is to imagine a world without gender as much as it is to imagine ways to disrupt the normative gendering process that, as I have argued, have implicit racial implications that cannot be ignored. This is not to say that the theory of the cyborg has no merit or value however it is to say that cyborg theory should be re-conceptualized to address the interactional dynamics of race as it intersects with sexuality, gender, and nationality in capitalist ordered societies. As it stands, imagining a world without gender theorizes gender as a category that can stand alone. While gender is important to acknowledge and study, the way gender is theorized here does address how gender functions as an anti-black heteronormative articulations of racial difference.⁴⁶ The absences I identify across these two special issues demonstrate the necessity of more rhetorical scholarship invested in attending to the complexities of Black women's navigation and negotiation of their (re)productive lives within anti-black heteronormativity. Moreover, Black feminist criticisms of the mainstream U.S. reproductive rights movement assert that by focusing solely on abortion that it fail to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of reproductive justice for Black women concerning reproduction. Jennifer Denbow's essay on sterilization and cyborg

⁴⁵Sabine Broeck, "Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology through Black Feminist Critique," *Gender Forum* 22, (2008): 1-4.

⁴⁶Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 17(1987): 64-81; See also, Roderick Ferguson, *Abberations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

theory raises similar questions for me regarding the invisibility or absence concerning Black women reproduction and maternity within theorizations of reproductive justice, even those intended for women of color. Her essay on sterilization and cyborg theory raises similar questions for me regarding the invisibility or absence concerning Black women's reproductive autonomy within theorizations of reproductive justice, even those intended for women of color. Reflecting on the absences I have previously identified, I shift to Saidiya Hartman and her understanding of the archive as a death tomb to consider (im)possibility within absence.

Saidiya Hartman's conceptual notion of the *archive as a death tomb* informs how I conceptualize, interrogate, and employ absence as a site of (im)possible for Black females' (re)productive lives.⁴⁷ In her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the 19th century America*, Hartman mulls over the "non-history" of Black slaves, arguing that the enslaved have no full record or history of slavery, only fragmented experiential accounts. The violence sanctioned through the legal political economy of slavery destroyed slaves' ability to construct their own histories, and archives. The documents contained in the archive are unable to construct historical record of events. These documents are unable to do so because of the way Black (women's) bodies, rather their black flesh, are regarded as property in the New World order.⁴⁸ The intergenerational gratuitous violence, sanctioned in anti-blackness, continues to have a substantial impact on future generations of Black (women's) bodies. Why are these absences, particularly within Communication Studies scholarship, accepted to the point that white feminists and maternal activists never consider their work *as not* being applicable to all women? How does the assumption that, "we are all women," undermine and conflate issues of social conflict with structural suffering? The blurring, or conflation of these distinct phenomena

⁴⁷Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁸Ibid.

assumes that all women are affected by anti-blackness in the same ways which I argue is misleading.

Hartman's work is valuable as she argues that the archive is not an objective entity that contains all the answers we seek. So, approaching archival research with the intention to revive the dead and their lives is impossible, according to Hartman, for the enslaved are always already seen as dead. Death, in this way, should be understood as the apparatus that governs social exclusion for Black (women's) bodies. The assumption that we can construct a full record (and gain complete understanding) of Black subjection, through our limited understanding of U.S. chattel slavery, imposes limits on what we can know through an assumption of what we can never know. In this way, the archive operates as a scene of subjection in which Black (women's) existence in the current world is narrowly acknowledged through their imposed social position as Slaves. The slave, as subject position, in this way represents the unspoken underside of white modernity's conception of humanity. Thus, the archive acts as a death tomb that upholds the Master/Slave narrative that found the American grammar of Black (women's) suffering. At this point, it has become difficult to think about my project without simultaneously considering the gaps and absences that exist within the archive itself. Were these absences coincidence or were they speaking to a larger pattern and problem? I find it difficult to conceive of these absences as mere oversights and innocent limitations considering that, historically, Black women have been treated as if they were invisible, as if they did not matter. So, why is the archive perceived to be a site or space in which we, as academics, as rhetorical scholars, can construct a full account or record of blackness? More so, why is the use of archival documents seen as prompting moments to liberate those dead bodies and documents from the contexts in which they were created to speak to?

The purpose of this project then is to consider the ways that Black women navigate the anti-black violence that constrains them, creating social life within social death via their (re)production. Social life, in this way, enables readings of (re)productive life for Black women through absence. These absences, I believe, generate moments within anti-blackness to theorize the complexities of Black women's lives. Despite *Frontiers'* espoused commitment to intersectionality as theoretical and methodological frameworks these special issues fail to address Black women specific reproductive concerns. The absences I identify across *Frontiers* issues prompts need for bodies of scholarship dedicated exclusively to Black women. Therefore, I interrogate the structural antagonisms that interact, producing the conditions in which these social identities gain meaning. In doing so, I look to come to a deeper understanding of contemporary Black women's sexuality and mothering and its relationship to Black women's struggles with reproduction. For this dissertation, I consider the multiple contexts in which Black women find themselves having to negotiate issues of reproduction and maternity in particular ways. In constructing the historical, social, and structural contexts, I examine Black women's use of rhetoric to negotiate the particularity of their struggle. I streamline my interrogation of Black women's negotiation of their (re)productive lives via rhetoric through a simultaneous critique of the white sovereign subject that governs heteronormative discourses of motherhood and reproduction. These Black women I speak of and with were Black women who were just fighting to live and enjoy their lives. Black women have been fighting from the very beginning to live, to have the access and freedom to determine the course of their lives without external pressure or oppressive control. Therefore, I come into conversation with Black women thinkers, writers, artists, and those who fluidly move between these spaces, and others with an understanding that we all just trying to live our lives. What I acknowledge coming into this mess myself is that,

bottom line, we have to find a way to live and thrive regardless of the violence we remain subjected to in anti-black heteropatriarchy.

Reflecting a bit further on *Frontiers'* special issues on reproductive rights, how do its editors, Guisela Latorre and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, continue to overlook Black women, especially when Black women's histories regarding exploitation, commodification, and criminalization of is well documented? One could suggest that because these histories are documented significantly that this type of absence is not as injurious as I look to suggest. Considering the absences surrounding Black women within the larger U.S. Reproductive Rights movement, I argue these absences uphold the imaginary authority of anti-black heteronormativity which profits from the subjection of Black women. It is impossible then for me to read these absences, across *Frontiers'* issues, as coincidental or mere circumstance. I forward this assertion with the recognition that the issues' editors are in fact women of color who sought out women of color to offer a number of historical and political perspectives on issues of reproduction and maternity. So, what are the implications of these absences concerning the regulation of Black mothering, and (re)production? More importantly, what rhetorics do Black women employ to challenge and disrupt the criminalization of their lives?

In Angela Davis' essay, published in *The Black Scholar*, concerning the social myth of Black matriarchy, she identifies the structural arrangements of chattel slavery and how they inform contemporary misconceptions regarding Black mothers.⁴⁹ More so, she addresses the ways that gender, feminism, and matriarchy were terms created based on the exclusion of Black female slaves. Davis insists:

The alleged to benefits of the ideology of feminist did not accrue to her. She was not sheltered or protected, she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for

⁴⁹Angela Davis, "Myth of the Black Matriarch," *The Black Scholar* 1 (1971) 8-16.

existence unfolding outside the ‘home.’ This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: in order approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of the slaves—the Black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity...in order to function as slave, the Black woman had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in her historical wardship under the entire male hierarchy.⁵⁰

In this excerpt, Davis poignantly speaks to the way that motherhood, as an institutional practice, was invented at the expense of Black female slaves, not in consideration of them. Davis’ insights open spaces to critically interrogate the landscape of motherhood as an invention of anti-blackness that dictates who can be recognized as “mother” and in what ways, or lack thereof. In this context, and the contexts imagined through the U.S. slavery plantation complex, white women benefit from the criminalization of Black mothering.

Black women’s particular struggles with abortion, sterilization, and infertility require us to adjust our theoretical and methodological approaches to move beyond coalitional agendas that foreclose opportunities to consider the structural antagonisms that shape women of color’s reproductive struggles. This particular approach, as I conceive of it, does not diminish, undermine, or take away from the collectivist efforts taken up historically by women of color. I do believe that women of color can and should work together on coalitional initiatives and projects. However, I believe this can only happen after we have come to significant terms with the specificities that contextualize Black women, Asian women, Latina women, Native American women, and Islamic women’s particular struggles with reproduction and maternity. Whose bodies, or images of whose bodies inform what we mean when we say and employ “difference” as a construct to generate coalitional projects? “Difference” to whom? From whose perspective is “difference” based? From whose perspective is “difference” perceived? An interrogation into

⁵⁰Ibid.

the specificities of Black women's experiences, for instance, should be understood as work engaging in coalitional efforts. Black women are women of color, right? So, to focus specifically on the contexts in which Black women find themselves navigating issues of reproduction and maternity, is in fact a coalitional project. That is, if the point of coalitional political projects is to call attention to the structural nature of suffering that is inflicted on racialized gendered subjects. Is recognizing the intersectional nature of women in service of espoused coalitional agendas enough?

To employ coalitional frameworks in this way, while well-intentioned, seems insufficient in doing the type of work I am personally invested in. For example, from what space and place do Black women understand their survival in a world that they were never meant to survive? I argue that thinking through these questions are important when interrogating the complex interiorities of Black women's experiences. It must go beyond simply recognizing social differences that exist between and across bodies. How do we understand how those social differences gain and sustain meaning in anti-black heteronormativity? Intersectional analyses and frameworks are useful in recognizing the racialization of subjects that contribute to the particular conundrums women of color find themselves in today. Attempts to incorporate women of color into conversations, culturally and politically, regarding reproduction assume "adding" them to the conversation resolves all our issues. Quite the contrary. Simply recognizing that Black women face and encounter particular struggles with reproduction does not result in transformation of society or Black women's status as inherently criminal, hypersexualized, and maternally irresponsible. I do not want to be a mere sprinkle added atop a Eurocentric legacy that refuses to critically interrogate itself in ways that prompt structural transformation for Black (women's) subjectivity.

My skepticism regarding coalitional politics and discourses does not mean that the idea of coalitions and working across interactional intersections are useless altogether. It is to say, for me, that the way we approach and engage in reproductive “justice” for women of color should always take into constant consideration the varying racialized gendered experiences. How effective is it to recognize the various intersections that may cause certain women to experience the world differently if we do not also recognize the frame that marks certain women’s bodies as always already “different.” Therefore, I am more interested in critically interrogating how these intersections interact to create and maintain the conditions in which certain subjects, like Black women, find themselves forced to negotiate.

Overall, *Frontier’s* 2013 and 2014 special issues on reproductive justice offer important questions on an expanding list of issues characterized as pertaining to issues of mothering and reproduction. The perspectives and theories offered in *Frontiers’* special issues present moments to critically reflect on the absences surrounding Black women’s and their lived communicative experiences within anti-blackness. The complexities and the nuances of Black women’s lived experiences particularly within the frame of social life as social death gets, for me, muddled and conflated in current types of coalitional discourses. Discourses that, I argue, tend to place more emphasis on women of color at large at the expense of interrogations into the specificities of particular “racialized subjects.”⁵¹

Rationale for Literature

I place Black feminist studies, Black Queer studies, and Afro-pessimism/futurism in conversation to attend to the assumptive social logics that characterize Black maternity, through discourses of Black women’s sexuality and Black reproduction, as a criminal danger to society at

⁵¹Jared Sexton, “Social Life in Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* (2011): 1-47.

large. In my dissertation project, I approach the theorization of Black female subjectivity, when read in the context of anti-blackness, as an invention of white modernity and the New World it created. I am not sure we can have a conversation about reproductive rights, or justice without simultaneously engaging in a conversation about Black mothering and Black women's sexuality. Although this project remains theoretical in nature, it nonetheless provides a rival space to think practically about Black women's participation in the contemporary U.S. reproductive rights movement. In order to come to terms with where the reproductive rights movement is currently, I push the existing boundaries of rhetorical scholarship to understand how we have gotten to this point and the implications for Black female subjects. Queer futurity, read through the context of anti-blackness, offers Black feminist theory a new object of study and contextualized frames in which to theorize Black females' subjection in anti-black heteronormativity.⁵² These frames offer the rhetorical toolkit necessary to unpack and disentangle the relations of power that inform the American grammar of Black suffering which have an impact on Black women's ability to advocate for themselves and their bodies. In addition, these frames present opportunities to critique political projects of "freedom" concerning women's reproductive autonomy, choice, and futures. If we do not attend to the relations of power that create the violent conditions in which Black women find themselves and their bodies, what ground might Black feminists stand to gain in the participation of a movement that actually benefits white women.

Mainstream Black feminist theory and Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurists, as I understand them, are interested in examining different contexts. Contexts, that while may speak to issues regarding the treatment of Black bodies in the Western white world, do so from radically conceived understandings of blackness. Drawing from Frank B. Wilderson's distinction

⁵²José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

between social (petty) conflicts and *structural antagonisms* (social oppression vs. structural suffering), Black feminists' focus on the cultural commodification, and exploitation of Black women's bodies diverges from Afro-pessimists and Afro-futurists who take an ontological approach to gaining deeper understanding of Black suffering.⁵³ This essay is important in that it openly challenges the perceived stability and authority of white global supremacy as it pertains to the lives of Black women. However, Afro-pessimist and Afro-futurist perspective, would question the very frame that Black feminists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins employ to engage in social critique about Black women.⁵⁴ This would be due to the fact that the commentaries focus on how Black bodies negotiate the materiality of social differences fail to situate an understanding of those differences within a field of U.S. structural antagonisms. Blackness, when read in the contexts of Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism, operates as a rhetorical construct through which anti-black heteronormativity establishes itself as sovereign, as natural, as normal. Anti-black heteronormativity, then, is the fictional social systemic order, enabled through the context of anti-blackness, not alongside it. The context of anti-blackness, both as a tauntology and an organizing social logic, enable deeper, more complex interrogations of Black subjects experiences within social death.⁵⁵ It is useful, I believe, to spend time discussing the mechanisms and strategies in which anti-black heteronormativity (dis)possesses Black people.

Black feminist theory has been significant in calling attention to the ways Black women actively resist and challenge anti-black heteronormativity. However, through the context of anti-

⁵³*Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵⁴*Ain't i a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981.); *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

⁵⁵In thinking of Sexton's argument concerning social life in social death, it is crucial to point out that social death is social life for Black subjects. So, the question concerning whether or not this construct humanizes Black bodies fails to take this into account. The (im)possibilities I speak to throughout this proposal become "possibilities" only through Sexton's theoretical framework.

blackness, I think we have an opportunity to gain further understanding of Black women's lives in social death. Therefore, Black Queer Studies scholarship could benefit from a re-reading through anti-blackness in order to keep white Queer Studies accountable for the implicit and complicit production of an epistemology erected on the subjection of Black (women's) bodies. Black Queer Studies critiques the normative discourses of race and sexuality particularly and its impact on Black queer folks in an anti-black misogynistic world. Black Queer Studies scholarship, as positioned in conversation with Black Feminist Studies offers rich theoretical and methodological perspectives, approaches, and frameworks that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of relationship I identify between language, space, and time as interacts with racialized gendered subjectivities and deviant discourses of sexuality. From here, I transition to introduce the method by which I conduct my analysis of a number of texts (which I also speak to below).

Note on Methodology

I created the rhetorical framework, Black Maternal Futurism (which I will discuss more in-depth in Chapter Two) to examine the complexities of Black women's mothering built upon interactions across Black feminist theory, Black Queer Studies, and Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism. These interactions and the types of questions they solicit inform the political and social landscape that characterizes Black mothering as criminal. What if we imagined Black women as representing or symbolizing infinite possibilities instead of the constrained, fixed ontological status assigned to these females as always subject, as dehumanized, as de-subjectified? What if these creatively imagined new futures for Black women serve as the sites through which Black mothering is theorized? In taking this theoretical re-imagining seriously, what does this mean for how Black women understand themselves as mothers despite the pathologization of Black motherhood? Theorizing *(re)productive life* in this way disrupts the ontological and

epistemological limits of Black female subjectivity (projected through heteropatriarchal notion of blackness) as imagined in an anti-black heteropatriarchal social order.

This rhetorical framework is committed to examining rhetorics produced by Black women as it concerns their mothering to gain a deeper understanding as to how they negotiate these contexts concerning their (re)production. Building from scholars situated within and across the aforementioned nexus of theoretical interests, I look to Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Alexis Gumbs, Frank Moten, Roderick Ferguson, Frank B. Wilderson, and Jared Sexton whose work assists in the creation of this methodological framework. To conduct my analysis on Black women's negotiation of (re)productive life within social death, I engage in a series of rhetorical criticisms. The ways that the aforementioned bodies of scholarship interact create opportunities to analyze the rhetorical contributions of Black women. In addition, it provides a frame to theorize Black women's queer relationship to maternity that envisions an "unlikely future" in the present violence that abject Black female bodies.

The research questions that inform my analysis are three-fold. First, how do Black women employ rhetoric as a critical tool for intervention in anti-black heteronormativity? Two, what types of practices or strategies have Black women produced to cultivate social life within social death? Third, how do these texts offer commentary on the anti-black heteronormative contexts that Black women must negotiate to assert power over their (re)productive lives? I argue that (re)productive life prompts new ways to theorize subjectivity for Black women in ways that do not preserve blackness as a heteronormatively conceived. Theorizing Black women in Eurocentric academic paradigms that do not simultaneously trouble that normative production of them as criminal enable their own subjection. Acknowledging the constraints imposed by these paradigms allows for possible re-readings of Black women's lived experiences that demonstrate

human agency despite imposed boundaries that intend to contain her. By doing so, I argue we can rhetorically generate potential futures for Black women that disrupt anti-black heteropatriarchal production of them as always already dangerous.

The linkages I draw across these vast bodies of critical theory provide a rich theoretical nexus from which I consider the relationship between contemporary mediated images of Black mothering and the state of reproductive justice for Black women in the U.S. I draw from a number of texts including archival materials, speeches and manifestos, cultural politics texts, news media texts regarding Black motherhood and Black women's sexuality, television and film/cinema texts, poetry, literary narratives, and musical lyrics. While the amount of texts may seem overwhelming for this project, I envision employing a select number of texts to analyze in relation to the themes that organize this dissertation. I contend that this particular approach is productive in that it attempts to have conversation across a number of texts (analyzing the negotiation of meaning interacting between and across bodies and texts) instead of isolating these patterns in single text chapters.

The guiding tenets that inform BMF provide the parameters, or scope in which my Afrafuturist feminist project is situated. I briefly identify five tenets here to offer clarity regarding the methodological approach I forward here. This approach, constituted by the aforementioned theoretical nexus, guides my rhetorical analyses of the political and social landscapes that conceives of Black motherhood as criminal, as deviant, as unable to reproduce properly in the world. The first tenet contends that when speaking of Black women's struggles regarding sexuality, reproduction, and maternity, we must do so through advent of *(re)productive life*. The second tenet reads Black maternity, as a queer conception (as criminal act), which disrupts anti-black heteronormativity's preservation of assumptive logics that privilege anti-

black heteropatriarchal capitalist formations of family and motherhood. The third tenet argues that the pathologized Black mother, as invented in anti-blackness, operates as a queer site of transformation. The fourth tenet advocates for the construction of rival landscapes that challenge normative conceptions of time and space to create a new time (our time) where can envision unlikely futures of Black women whose motherhood is not used as a site to abject them. In these spaces, it wouldn't be about one perspective being louder or more dominant than the other as much as it is recognizing, through rhetorical means, the multiplicity of voices that exist which attempt to speak to the structural nature of their oppression in their own communicative means. The fifth and final tenet employs rhetoric as a critical tool for intervention which enables critiques of anti-blackness and the logics deployed in anti-black heteronormativity that justify the gratuitous violence imposed on Black bodies.

Chapter-by-Chapter Design

Black women's participation in the struggle for reproductive "rights," dating back to the Middle Passage and slavery provide the historical backdrop of this dissertation. The first two chapters detail the communicative context, academically and politically, that inform my rhetorical analysis concerning Black women's sexual expression, Black mothering, and (re)production. The following two chapters examine Black women's mothering to analyze the ways Black women negotiate their (re)productive lives in gratuitous sexual violence. The final chapter and conclusion reflect on the project, citing implications and directions for future research. I examine various texts including Black women's literary fiction, webchat series, interviews, roundtables, reality television, public culture and popular culture think-pieces, essays & editorials, public speeches, political manifestos, musical lyrics and autobiographies. Collectively these texts facilitate a rhetorical reimagining of Black women's mothering in anti-blackness on their own terms. This expansive range of texts provide moments to examine the

complexity of Black women's lives as experienced in structural (dis)possession. I analyze these fragmented moments, read through an Afrofuturist feminist theoretical lens, arguing that Black women's discourses across time and space cultivate theories of (re)productive life *for* Black women.

The types of texts that I analyze across these chapters, through a theoretical nexus of Black feminist theory, Black Queer Studies, Afro-pessimism, Afro-futurism/optimism and Afro-realism enable nuanced insight into the state (intimate) violence conferred on Black women. The violence that Black women speak to and about, that on the surface, may seem to have nothing to do with Black mothering are the moments I wish to interrogate here. As dis-junctured or seemingly disconnected as these discourses/texts may appear to be, I argue that it is in reading these texts as challenging time and place that generates moments to re-imagine how Black women create social life in social death. While all of these texts, as individual texts, are not free from doing violence to the notion of black womanhood, when read collectively they produce something rhetorical. These chapters analyzes a range of texts to re-imagine the fruits of Black women's (re)production through a consideration of the ways they mother themselves through structural abjection.

Chapter One: Black Mothering, Controlling Images, and The Academy

In Chapter One, I review the relevant academic literature on Black mothering and the historical and contemporary images of Black women that criminalize their sexuality and (re)production. I argue that the discourses regarding Black women's mothering offer commentary on the shifting landscape of the U.S. reproductive rights movement, focusing exclusively on Black women. For centuries, African American women have struggled to regain

control of their reproductive systems in the U.S.⁵⁶ I contend that only once we have begun to unearth the complexity of Black women's experiences as mothers, as producers of life (albeit in constrained ways) can we begin to imagine an infinite number of subject positions from which female subjects speak that disrupt the anti-black heteronormative logic that contends, "because I cannot understand you I must destroy you."⁵⁷

Chapter Two: An Introduction to *Black Maternal Futurism*

In Chapter Two, I draw from and speak to the history of Black women's (re)productive struggles to imagine a different kind of rhetorical framework to analyze their mothering in intimate state violence. The struggle that African American women have faced surrounding bodily autonomy wages on well into the 21st century. Although "women" share a common struggle regarding retaining their reproductive rights, Black women possess a unique set of issues at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality; more specifically, the racialized dilemmas that Black women endure in the U.S. date back as early as Colonial institution of slavery. I focus on Black women's use of rhetoric and language to navigate violent economies of anti-black time and place through practices of self-definition and self-care. Utilizing an Afrafuturist feminist perspective, I read Black women's discourses through "Our Time" to be generating spaces to critique anti-black heteronormative narratives criminalizing their mothering and (re)production.

Chapter Three: Reimagining Black Women's Mothering and (Re)productivity

In Chapter Three, I examine Black women's production of self-determined narratives regarding their (re)productive lives as they describe the violent anti-black conditions that

⁵⁶For more on the history of Black women's particular struggles with their sexual reproduction, see: bell hooks, *Ain't i a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Loretta Ross, "African American Women and the Abortion," *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, ed. Stanlie Myrise James and Abena P.A. Busia (New York: Psychology Press, 1993), 141-159.

⁵⁷Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).

constrain their every-day lives. Drawing on Black women's public discourses, I use Afrafuturist feminist theory to reread how their texts communicate across time and space. Their discourses, detailing and critiquing the structural constraints imposed on their lives, generate spaces to theorize/re-imagine the complexity of Black women's mothering and (re)productivity. In other words, I explore the ways Black women utilize rhetoric as a tool that challenges narratives condemning their subjection, offering spaces to define, name, and create their own worlds. These contexts are essential in attending to the complexities of Black women's mothering and (re)production in anti-blackness.

Chapter Four: Negotiating Isolation and Shame in Intimate State Violence

In Chapter Four, I argue, Black women's literary and public discourses describe and critique the everydayness of (re)productive violence Black women experience in an anti-blackness. I examine the ways Black women negotiate themselves in contexts that isolate and shame them via anti-black heteronormative sexual politics. The historical violation of Black women's (re)productive labor haunts Black women as they look to assert their sexual and erotic desires. Black women's blood ties and sex histories bring attention to the complexities of their (re)productive lives in gratuitous sexual violence. For Black mothers, isolation is characteristic to their mothering in that the historical ramifications of Black children being torn from their mothers and mothers being denied any rights to their children. Shame around sexual expression intimately tied to criminalization of Black women's (re)productivity. I contend that these categories are important as they call attention to anti-black heteronormative sexual politics that condemn Black women's (re)productive labor including their roles as mothers.

Chapter Five: Spirituality, (Re)productive Labor, and the Mothering of Self

In Chapter Five, I focus specifically on how Black women employ spirituality as rhetorical practice to mother self. I argue that Black women's mothering includes a mothering of

self via what I refer to as religions of self-care. Spirituality is important to Black women's mothering in context of intimate state violence because it is the means by which Black women support and empower themselves from within themselves. These religions of self-care are the means through which Black women empower themselves through the never-ending, everyday struggles for (re)productive life. Through BMF, I examine Black women's spirituality as means through which Black women mother themselves against calculated abuse intent to weaken and harm them. I draw from Audre Lorde's notion of mothering self to re-imagine the ways Black (re)produce to produce lives of their own, on their own terms in anti-black suffering.⁵⁸

Chapter Six: Black Girl Magic, Revolutionary Heritage, and (Re)productive Life

In Chapter Six, I consider how Black women's (re)productive labor enables them to assert their self-determined power. Black girl magic, in this chapter, refers to the legacy and revolutionary heritage that Black women create and sustain on strength of their (re)production. Black girl magic draws on and from Black women's past and present labor to spark creative energies designed to produce strategies for living in relation to intimate state violence. Black women's rhetorical practices concerning Black girl magic disrupt time and place in their appeal to Black girl's magic that publicly highlights Black women's (re)productive labor. I assert that Black women draw from and on their revolutionary heritage of (re)production in ways that actively confront the mythical authority of anti-blackness that criminalizes them.

Chapter Seven: Implications and Future Directions

The seventh and final chapter will provide implications of my research and future directions of my critical impulse as it pertains to Black mothering and (re)production. More specifically, I reflect on the importance of my study and what it contributes to both rhetorical studies and larger discipline of Communication Studies.

⁵⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORIZING BLACK MATERNAL FUTURISM

What happens when the object(ified) lesson, the queer(ed) Black mother, becomes the teacher? What happens if we inhabit the questions and experiments of these maligned and dangerous teachers? What can we learn about the social reproduction of racism and capitalism through the excluded, or tokenized work of those troublemaking teachers, poets and interdependent publishers who sought to produce something else?⁵⁹

Rhetorical studies preoccupation with political discourses, citizenship, and rights continues to shape the contemporary landscape of rhetorical scholarship in Communication Studies.⁶⁰ While contemporary rhetorical studies provide an important foundation to study discourses of power and domination, rhetoric does not resolve nor end Black women's structural suffering. Critical rhetoric, as introduced by Raymie Mckerrow, within the contemporary landscape, for instance, is invested in unpacking systems of domination and discourses of power.⁶¹ Contemporary rhetorical studies fascination with relations of power and domination in white global supremacy strengthen anti-black logics empowering the white sovereign subject.⁶² Raymie McKerrow's germinal essay on critical rhetoric is important it emphasizes a need for more rhetorical scholarship to examine discourses of power preventing social change. He says:

⁵⁹Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves': A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the 'Present', *Gender Forum* 22 (2008), www.org/issues/black-womens-writing-revisited/we-can-learn-to-mother-ourselves.

⁶⁰See for other sources on critical rhetoric: Maurice Charland, "Finding a Horizon and Telos: The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 75-78; Robert Hariman, "Critical Rhetoric in a Postmodern World," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 67-70; Kent A. Ono & John M. Sloop, "Commitment to Telos—A Sustained Critical Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992): 48-60; Dana L. Cloud, "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 58 (1994): 141-163.

⁶¹Raymie McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91-111.

⁶²See for more sources on anti-blackness and questions of subjectivity: Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13 (2003): 183-201; Sabine Broeck, "Property: White Gender and Slavery," *Gender Forum* 14, (2006): 1-6.

In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change.⁶³

In stressing the importance of unmasking discourses of power, his understanding of power as discursive does not trouble the fungibility of blackness used to maintain relations of power as is. Power and domination in this instance first normalize the violence to then examine its affects; it is in the normalizing of these power structures, as is, that obscures more nuanced considerations into the anti-black logics that structure Black women's (dis)possession.

McKerrow's insights are important because it fosters space for rhetorical scholars like Robert Ivie and his scholarship stressing the importance of studying culture in rhetorical criticism. Ivie asserts, "Good criticism explores rhetorical history with an eye for innovations as well as conventions, missed opportunities as well as actualities. We cannot look back at a rhetorical artifact without examining it as a cultural force."⁶⁴ He argues that in doing "good criticism" rhetorical scholars must examine the cultural forces and historical discourses that assign meaning to particular rhetorics and artifacts in particular places in time. Discourses of power, as cultural artifacts, according to Ivie, should be analyzed in the context of the cultural forces that inform them. Yet, rhetorical scholarship on Black mothering in Communication Studies continues to situate analyses of Black women's liberation and struggles for autonomy within the same contexts that demand their subjection. The tendency in contemporary rhetorical studies, evidenced in McKerrow and Ivie, are important to acknowledge as I create an entirely different rhetorical framework to examine Black women's rhetorical practices. In recognizing

⁶³Raymie McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 91.

⁶⁴Robert Ivie, Rhetorical Innovations, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 2.

these blind spots within contemporary rhetorical scholarship, rhetoric provides toolkit needed to demystify anti-black capitalist relations criminalizing Black women's mothering. Despite a specific focus on demystifying discourses of power through, for instance, examining strategic rhetorics of whiteness, contemporary rhetorical scholars fail to interrogate the anti-black nature of power that extends beyond rhetorics of humanity, citizenship, and social inequity.⁶⁵ So, while the purpose is to study rhetorics of power articulated through mythical notions of whiteness is admirable, the language strengthens anti-black logics.

In Karma Chávez's recent essay in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, she invites rhetorical scholars to consider the untapped potential of rhetorical studies.⁶⁶ The discipline's fixation on normative citizenship to demystify rhetorics of domination, control and resistance is constraining. In arguing for the future potential of rhetorical scholarship, she states that the discipline's intellectual history "obscures and implies about whose rhetorical practices are worthy of engagement, whose rhetorical practices can serve as the material basis for our rhetorical theory, and what modes of rhetorical practice as well as rhetorical theory and criticism matter."⁶⁷ In this quote, Chávez addresses the constraints concerning the disciplines focus on the normative formation of citizenship as *the* historical narrative regulating rhetorical theory and criticism. Breaking away from tradition, Chávez examines three essays that act as "touchstones" in imagining rhetoric as "something entirely different."⁶⁸

⁶⁵By anti-black nature of power, I refer to the ways that these concepts remain embedded in the logics structured to always already exclude a consideration of the underside of modernity and its inhabitants, Black people.

⁶⁶Karma R. Chavez, "Beyond Inclusion: Rethinking Rhetoric's Historical Narrative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2015): 162-172.

⁶⁷Ibid., 164.

⁶⁸Ibid., 163.

The inclusion of historically marginalized groups, in of itself, does not break away from discipline's intellectual history that regulates what is and is not considered rhetorical theory.

Chávez explains:

Of course, some of us have written of women of color, people of color, indigenous folks, and immigrants, too. But even in those cases many of which explore how the marginalized petition the State for recognition or redress, the study of rhetoric in the main study of people appealing to/for citizenship.⁶⁹

Inclusion, as she asserts above, does not mean that we avoid the issues she identifies concerning the constraints of the intellectual history that regulates rhetorical theoretical scholarship. In other words, including historically marginalized groups in rhetorical studies examining they ways these groups appeal to state for “recognition or redress,” does not enable an imagining of rhetoric as non-normative and non-Western. Continuing to study how marginalized groups petition the state for normative citizenship in rhetoric misses opportunities to theorize rhetorical practices (and those practices worthy of study) as non-normative, non-citizen, and non-Western.

In this chapter, I introduce Black Maternal Futurism (BMF) to guide my analysis concerning Black women's rhetorical practices regarding their mothering and (re)production. First, I discuss the importance of queer time and its relationship to BMF as it pertains to Black women's mothering and (re)production. Second, I flesh out the utility of an Afrafuturist feminist perspective to help clarify the relationship I identify between queer time and Black mothering. Lastly, I consider the significance of an Afrafuturist feminist lens critiquing anti-black heteropatriarchal discourses pathologizing Black women's (re)productive labor. I transition to introduce Jared Sexton's conception of *social life in social death* which informs the central thesis

⁶⁹Ibid., 163.

of my dissertation which is that Black women continue to find ways to (re)produce despite constraints set-up in anti-black heteropatriarchy to criminalize them and all that they produce.

Social Life in Social Death

As discussed in Chapter One, prevents them from ever transcending their slave status to the land of a living and full human subjectivity. What is not considered human cannot possibly be a citizen therefore Black women as fleshly commodities remain undeserving of full state protection and sanctioned rights. Applying terms like the citizen and subject in studying Black women's lived experiences in systemized suffering operates assuming that the Slave has been granted full human subjectivity and citizenship which, as I argue, fails to grasp the complexity of structural violence. In an attempt to answer Chavez's call to imagine rhetoric differently, I have designed BMF to analyze Black women's rhetorical practices as they are (re)produced in anti-black gratuitous violence.

Drawing from Jared Sexton's theorization of social life in social death, I argue that Black women striving for white heteronormative social life through the U.S. Reproductive Rights movement contribute to their own structural subjection.⁷⁰ For Sexton, white social life, within anti-black heteronormativity, is unattainable because the Black body is enmeshed in sets of power relations that treat them as powerless. White subjects are structurally (ontologically) granted access to notions of humanity denied to Black bodies. However, Sexton simultaneously contends that Black social death *is* black social life which offers space to account for the constitution of the structural system, not just its operational dynamics.

Drawing from Orlando Patterson and Saidiya Hartman, Sexton makes it clear that his conceptualization of Black social life is not one that is generalizable; in other words, his

⁷⁰Jared Sexton, "Social life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism," *In Tensions* 5 (2011): 1-47.

conception of social death is framed in specific consideration of slavery and Black people.⁷¹ To further this point, Sexton looks to Ross K. Baker who asserts:

The mere fact of slavery makes black Americans different. No amount of tortured logic could permit the analogy to be drawn between a former slave population and an immigrant population, no matter how low-flung the latter group.⁷²

In reflecting on this passage, I read Sexton as attempting to theorize possibilities within the structure of impossibility that governs Black (women's) bodies. While Afro-pessimist & Afro-futurist readings would seem depressing, paralyzing, essentialist, and divisive, this collection of scholars attempt to radically re-imagine the viability of Black subjectivity. What does it mean to envision an ontological project where the Slave is no longer the Slave of the world? Why do we imagine those living within social death as desiring to re-position themselves within the same system that sponsors their subjection? Historically, moves toward political action were thought necessary. However, I now wonder whether the political system even has the capacity to address Black (women's) suffering. I am skeptical of political agendas that center or highlight capitalist formations of motherhood. So, from my perspective, stirring in considerations of race that offer visibility for "marginalized bodies" fundamentally kills any chance for structural, ontological transformation within said system for Black (women's) bodies. In hope of working towards a similar aim, I employ Sexton's construct of social life in social death to consider the potentiality of Black maternities as rival rhetorics that signal toward a theory of (re)productive life that Black women themselves create.

⁷¹Orlando Paterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); For more see, Saidiya Hartman, (New York: Oxford University Press).

⁷²Ross K. Baker, "Review of *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*," *Worldview Magazine* 26. (1983): 21.

For rhetorical scholars, this provides opportunities to collaborate with Black feminist Studies, Black Queer Studies, and Afro-pessimist and Afro-futurist studies to theoretically and practically imagine a world that simply does not exist for Black mothers, yet. Alexis Gumbs argues that the image of the pathologized Black mother allows for a dialogic paradigm shift for future generations of Black (women's) bodies saying:

While the erasure or subsumption of the subjectivity of mothers under the authority of patriarchy has facilitated essentialist reproductions of racialized dehumanization, the rival authority of the Black mother has the potential to reveal racial difference as a social narrative, the terms of which are contingent and do not have to be reproduced.⁷³

Her use of the term “queer,” in relation to Black maternity, looks to “disrupt anti-black heteropatriarchal narratives on families and capitalist development and as a modifier that causes the term that follows to exceed what they have named.”⁷⁴ Gumbs’ sensibilities concerning Black mothering as criminal act informs my project’s overarching thesis which is that Black mothers utilize rhetoric as an interventionist tool to imagine their futures *within* social death. Anti-black heteronormativity’s authority which feeds on the intergenerational suffering of Black flesh, requires, for me, different theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to conceptualize what it means for Black women to assert their (re)productive life from the land of the socially undead.

The image of the pathologized Black mother, acts as a site from which Black women generate space for themselves to define themselves including their mothering and (re)production. Black women navigate state-sponsored gratuitous sexual violence using their (re)production to produce social life in social death. Maternity, or the discourses that regulate our conception of

⁷³Alexis Pauline Gumbs, ‘We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves’, para. 8.

⁷⁴Ibid., para. 11.

maternity, are entangled in the politics of racialized domination and suffering within anti-black heteronormativity. Thus, the paradoxical treatment of Black women's bodies as producing yet not the producer demonstrate a need for more nuanced rhetorical analyses concerning Black women's (re)productive lives. Black women's bodies serve as the underside of white women's subjectivity in an anti-black heteronormative world, so it is unproductive to theorize Black maternity specifically in broad, generalizable terms. Now, I transition to offer a distinction between (re)productive life and (re)productive justice to problematize biological narratives of reproductivity. I introduce a sample text here to provide a necessary contrast to the type of rhetorics that generate and maintain a theory of (re)productive life for Black women. Dirty 30 is a ten part documentary series on HIV and aids. The creator of the documentary, Hannelore Williams opens the street style documentary saying, "My name is Hannelore and I turn 30 this year, and so does HIV. I'm traveling the world to find the voices of the pandemic today and not re-hash the images of the 80's and 90's. I am a Black woman who was raised by a single Black woman and we have the fastest growing population with new infections in the U.S. today."⁷⁵ The particular episode I present here is the first episode of the documentary series entitled, "Black Women and Single Motherhood." In this episode, the creator correlates African American male incarceration rates, the vulnerability of heterosexual African Americans, and the socially constructed phenomenon, "the down low." She draws these connections in effort to discuss how single Black mothers (because its assumed their men are in jail) cope with contracting HIV from partners having sex with men in jail and the effects it has on their kids. Williams interviews several Black women, who identify as heterosexual, who provide a majority of the discussion throughout the episode. Her interviewees are both Black women who are living with HIV as

⁷⁵Dirty 30: Black Women and Single Motherhood. Directed by Hannelore Williams. December 1, 2014. Youtube, (00:25-00:52).

single moms as well as those who remain fearful of contracting this disease. In addition to the Black women who share their personal testimonies, Williams also taps a former NBC correspondent, a White man who comes in to provide the “facts” about the infection rates among Black women. This sample text allows us to consider the utility of (re)productive life, as frame through which to critique the discourses regulating Black women sexuality, maternity, and reproduction collectively.

Although this episode attempts to shed light on issues facing heterosexual, cis-gender single Black mothers it simultaneously reproduces white heteronormative understandings of sexuality, sexual, expression, and single motherhood. The former NBC correspondent, unsurprisingly, draws connections between “risky” sexual behavior and sharing drug needles to poverty and Black women. To be clear, these linkages are not new as it informs the ways public policy regulates Black women’s (re)productive lives. The speculative assumptions, positioned by way of personal testimony, levied by the Black women participants in the episode make explicit assumptions regarding Black queer sexualities which remain unchallenged by Williams or the participants themselves. In doing so, I see this particular episode as insinuating that the transmission of HIV is not an issue for Black queer and genderqueer folks. To me, this demonstrates the ways heterosexuality and motherhood as biological are linked in ways that exclude consideration of Black queer women as mothers. More specifically, it forecloses opportunities to conceive of ways Black women mother themselves as matters of (re)production and (re)productive life. The “down low” phenomenon has created "issues" for heterosexual Black women through assumed deviant, malicious "down low" behavior. Although this episode tries to tackle issues of sexuality and motherhood in relation to HIV the documentary goes about it in problematic ways. Ultimately, I argue that the episode offers no transformative space in

which to conceive of Black mothering that questions the heteronormative notions of mothering. This is of course even when Black women such as Loretta Ross and Dorothy Roberts who acknowledge Black queer women's (re)productive concerns. The inclusion of Black queer women and nonbinary femmes does not in of itself get Black women any closer to resolving or transcending their structural (dis)possession. Rather, it is also important to question the anti-black heteronormative logics embedded in liberatory rhetorics concerning Black women's reproductive justice that remain unchallenged. In other words, in recognizing that Black queer and genderqueer folks may choose to, or not to, have or raise children we must still interrogate the logics that privilege mothering in the biological sense and reproduction as heterosexual act. Using my particular methodological approach, this project looks to analyze Black women's rhetoric by way of critiquing how certain discourses on Black maternity and reproduction employ logics of anti-blackness. For sure, not all Black women generate rhetorics that lend itself to the creation of a rival landscape. This text is representative of the type of text I employ to contrast the types of rhetorics I argue work to de-center the imaginary authoritative of Anti-Black heteronormativity and its claim to Black female bodies.

(Re)productive Life vs. Reproductive Justice

Drawing from Alexis Gumbs, Black women's struggles for their (re)productive lives should de-center the state as the sovereign authority, the only authority, through which they can secure their "rights" as sexual beings, as mothers and as human beings. The political system, by its very nature, is unable to resolve the structural subjections as it relies on these subjections to erect and sustain itself. I contend that there is no way to humanize Black women within the same political systems that abject them. The inability of the state to do so demonstrates the need to extend beyond examining the operational dynamics of social conflict, to interrogate the paradoxical system of structural antagonisms. Building from Wilderson and Sexton's work, I

argue that the state is unable to recoup the “humanity” of Black women.⁷⁶ Centering the state in considering Black motherhood only strengthens anti-black heteronormativity’s claim on all Black women’s (re)production. It is not enough to denounce the state and decenter emphasis on politics, it is simultaneously important to critique the assumptive logics that associate mothering as biological. Black women’s political advocacy for reproductive justice, despite the inclusion of Black queer women and genderqueer folks, do not contest heteronormative ideologies assumed in notion of mothering and reproduction.

I offer a distinction between *(re)productive life* and reproductive rights, justice, and freedom to differentiate my particular approach from those approaches that center concerns for reproductive rights, freedoms, and justice.⁷⁷ The lack of recognition, naming, and critique of heterosexuality as it pertains to questions of sexuality, maternity, and reproduction endorse state sanctioned gratuitous violence imposed on all Black (women’s) bodies, particularly Black queer women and nonbinary femmes. So, how does this relate to questions of Black mothering and (re)production? Theories advocating for rights, freedoms, and justice as it concerns heterosexual, cis-gender Black women’s sexual reproduction and biological mothering fail to consider the structural logics that perpetuates the criminalization of Black women’s (re)production. How can we forward theories concerning reproductive rights and Black mothering if Black queer bodies are always already assumed to not be included? If reproductive justice, as it is deployed in contemporary reproductive rights discourses, is attainable for all Black women then why are Black queer women excluded from public conversations about mothering and (re)production?

⁷⁶Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, white, and black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press).

⁷⁷I use term (re)production (and its variations) to speak to Black women’s varied experiences as it pertains to the exploitation of the physical/economic/productive and reproductive labor concurrently. I employ the term (re)productive life fluidly, as a concept and a framework, to tease out the complexities of their mothering strategies in gratuitous sexual violence.

This distinction is important because (re)productive life, as I use it here, interrogates Black mothering to trouble biological conceptions of mothering to consider the ways Black women mother themselves. Transposing the political state and biological conceptions of mothering, I examine Black women's rhetorical practices to imagine their (re)production as something entirely different.

Therefore, this project de-centers *Roe v. Wade* as the starting point to engage critical discussions of Black women's (re)productive lives, centering instead the Middle Passage and U.S. colonial slavery. In paying closer attention to the ontological, historical, and socio-political contexts (pre-*Roe* and post-*Roe*) that inform discourses on Black women's sexuality maternity, and (re)production, I contend that rhetorical scholars can better speak to the reasons that Black women's interaction with the political state has not resulted in any structural transformation over the course of over 400 years. Within and across *Frontiers'* special issues, there remain substantive gaps concerning the elision of Black women's particular struggles with reproduction and maternity. If anything, the explicit focus on reproductive rights which employ intersectional perspectives and approaches concerning women of color, make the absences surrounding Black women painfully explicit. How do discourses of sexuality, mapped on to Black women's bodies, constrain their ability to be recognized as political human subjects? How are discourses on Black women's sexuality deployed to constrain assumptions regarding Black mothering practices and their (re)productive lives? It seems ineffective to discuss Black women's (re)production without simultaneously interrogating the anti-black heteronormative assumptions concerning Black women's sexuality as it pertains to Black women.

Black mothering, situated in this project concerning Black women's (re)productive life, both as a concept and conceptual framework, focuses on how they strategize their lives in

gratuitous sexual violence. As a concept, (re)productive life addresses the ways that Black women's physical productive labor and their sexual reproductive labor exploited simultaneously creating the particular conditions in which Black women struggle over their (re)productive lives. As a conceptual framework, (re)productive life problematizes Black women's mothering as biological and (re)production as sexual to imagine the ways Black women mother self. (Re)productive life, as a rival landscape to imagine social life in social death, enables two (im)possible possibilities.⁷⁸ In this rival landscape mothering, for Black women, assumed more meanings than those traditionally linked to birthing and raising children. Firstly, (re)productive life enables consideration of Black queer women as mothers in ways that challenge biological assumptions that regulate mothering in anti-blackness. I forward (re)productive life in order to theorize Black women's reproductive struggles simultaneously, as opposed to exclusively. Secondly, (re)productive life, as I deploy it here, facilitates discussions of mothering and reproduction de-linked from narratives criminalizing Black women's (re)production via sexual politics. (Re)productive life is the guiding frame through which I methodologically and theoretically consider rival rhetorics of Black maternity produced by both Black queer and heterosexual, cis-gender Black women. This project de-centers politicized concerns for reproductive rights in that it does not seek accountability from the law and political sphere to resolve Black women's intergenerational struggle for (re)productive life. Theorizing Black women's (re)productive life in this way enables consideration of ways that Black women disrupt the ontological and epistemological production of black mothers as criminal dangers to society. Danger, in this context, refers to the anti-black heteropatriarchal assumptions of black women as dangerous due to their perceived sexual deviancy.

⁷⁸By (im)possible, I speak to the ways that Black women's rhetorical practices highlight the mythical boundaries of anti-blackness that regulate what is normatively considered as "possible" and "impossible" for Black women because they are both Black and woman.

Black women's rhetorical practices across time and space to rethink what their discourses and texts tell us about how they redefine themselves and their labor on their own terms. In imagining rhetoric as "something different," I offer an alternative way to interrogate Black women's mothering in the anti-black contexts that shape their lived experiences. BMF, as I envision it, employs rhetoric as a tool to interrogate Black women's complex negotiation of self and other to generate their own rival definitions of their Black(woman)ness. Rhetoric, as a tool of intervention cannot end or resolve the crisis of Black (dis)possession in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world. Black (women's) dehumanization and (dis)possession are the conditions in which anti-black heteropatriarchy maintains its authority. Rhetoric then, as I understand it here, does not contain the solutions to resolve the contradictions and crises brought on by the regime of anti-black politics coated in strategic rhetorics of whiteness. Instead, I contend that rhetoric offers resources necessary to imagine a world and time that does not yet exist; that is, rhetoric offers frames to ruminate over other worlds and times to theorize Black mothering. In other words, an Afrafuturist orientation to the study of Black women's rhetoric.

Therefore, I contend that this particular type of rhetorical analysis, centered on examining assumptive logics of anti-blackness violating Black women, offer rival ways to theorize Black women's subjectivity as asserted through their mothering and (re)production. BMF provides opportunities for rhetorical scholars to analyze the complexities of Black women's (re)productive lives. This rhetorical framework uses rhetoric as tool to re-imagine the ways Black women, in (dis)possession, negotiate their lives on their own terms. Now, I introduce Afrafuturist feminist perspective as the theoretical framework that guides my rhetorical analysis, within BMF.

An Afrafuturist Feminist Perspective

In analyzing Black women's rhetorical practices concerning their mothering and (re)production, I employ an Afrafuturist feminist perspective to problematize biological conceptions of mothering. This perspective in order to reread Black women's mothering as queer(ed).⁷⁹ Reading Black mothering as queer(ing) the time and place that criminalizes their (re)production "exploit[s] the limits of permissible, creating transient zones of freedom, and re-laborating innocent amusements which were central features of everyday practice."⁸⁰ Afrafuturist feminist theory "exploits the limits of permissible" as I examine the ways Black women create social lives for themselves in confines of their social death. In recognizing the irreversible nature of structural suffering, Black women remain resilient in thriving despite their subjection. Black women's communicative practices detailing the everydayness of perpetual ravishment generate "transient zones" to assert their self-worth, determination, and power. This theory's particular emphasis on time and place important here as I interrogate the ways Black women thrive within the confines securing their subjection. Time and place are important, as I will discuss later in this chapter, as Black women cultivate strategies for survival that generate rival time and space to theorize their mothering and (re)production. Theorizing Black women's lives within anti-black contexts sponsoring their (dis)possession does not reduce or define them to the painful, intolerable, unimaginable suffering they experience. Black women's capacity to create and produce means of living does not change or transform the time and place that violates

⁷⁹Gumbs use of the terms "queer" and "queering" trouble and refashion anti-black capitalist relations of family, state, culture; queer(ing) and queer(ed) as active verbs to describe what Black women are cultivating as they (re)produce. For more on work on queering as an analytic that challenges and disrupts the establishment of heteronormativity as sovereign, see: Kristen Lillis, "Becoming Self and Mother: Posthuman Liminality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Routledge* 54 (2013): 452-464; Heather Tapley, "Queering paradise: Toni Morrison's Anti-capitalist Production," *Sage* 14 (2013): 21-37; Christopher S. Lewis, "Queering Personhood in the Neo-Slave Narrative: Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*," *African American Review* 47 (2014): 447-459.

⁸⁰Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 50.

Black women. In other words, I study the ways Black women's (re)productive lives undermine, challenge, and refashion structural conditions of Black natal alienation into sites of futuristic (im)possibilities.⁸¹

Drawing from Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, and Alexis Gumbs, I employ an Afrafuturist feminist perspective to analyze the ways that Black women exploit the limits of (im)possibility with their (re)production. It is it from the realm of the (im)possible that what is perceived "impossible" for Black women yet possible for white women is called into question as they assert control over their lives. Plainly put, Black women's rhetorical practices challenge the nature of time and place that condition their suffering while simultaneously refashioning idea of self, space and kinships. BMF provides the necessary rhetorical framework to study the ways Black women mother their minds, bodies, and spirits in a violent anti-black heteropatriarchal world. I employ Afrafuturist feminist theory to analyze Black women's mothering.

Afrafuturist feminist perspective refashions rhetoric as a tool to study the complexities of Black women's (re)productive lives within gratuitous violence. Theoretically and methodologically, this particular approach provides moments to theorize the worlds Black women create beyond, yet within, the constraints of the anti-black heteronormative narratives criminalizing their mothering and (re)production. What does reproductive justice mean, as conceived of in modern and contemporary societies, for Black women considering the structural impossibilities that always already prevent those possibilities? What does reproductive justice mean if securing this freedom requires the continuation subjection of all Black women? I employ BMF to study the ways Black women's rhetorical practices challenge the time and place

⁸¹(Im)possibility here specifically speaks to ways Black women's attempt to transform their everyday lives within the gratuitous sexual violence which is why I did not want to re-center my discussion on Black women's mothering and (re)productive life in the same anti-black capitalist state structured to (dis)possess them.

criminalizing their mothering through normative narratives on mothering and (re)production. By paying attention to Black women's rhetorical practices as sources from which they generate their own power, I argue rhetorical scholars gain a more nuanced understanding of power relations impacting their everyday lives.

I find it difficult to theorize the liberation of Black women as mothers and (re)producers if we do not interrogate the insidious logics and schemas that pathologize their existence and, their resistance. The violence that Black mothers may exhibit and direct toward themselves and their children provide complex moments to consider the conditions that shape her behavior; that is, instead of perpetuating narratives that criminalize Black women for their gratuitous violence they experience.⁸² Black women's mothering is messy and potentially violent because of the violence that conditions Black women's (re)productive lives via rape, isolation, exploitation and death. By messy, I mean to say that some Black women's mothering strategies do not produce magical fairytale endings for them or their children. Thus, I mull over what Black women's (re)productive lives communicate about both the violence of anti-blackness and the strategies they create to live and thrive within the lethal boundaries of anti-black american culture.

Navigating Gendered Blackness in “Our Time”

In reading Black women's rhetorical practices as queer(ing) time, I posit “Our Time” as offering spaces to analyze the ways Black women renegotiate their natal alienation as site of future possibility. I conceived of “Our Time” to highlight and critique the anti-black heteronormative logics that criminalize Black women's mothering. Reading Black women's discourses through “Our Time” enables more in-depth consideration of what it means to mother in anti-blackness. Queer time, as conceived in BMF, is essential in troubling and challenging the

⁸²Sabine Broeck, “Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology through Black Feminist Critique,” *Gender Forum* 22, (2008): 1-4.

relationship between time and place.⁸³ Gumbs use of the term “queer” as way to help envision a rival landscape situated within a violent capitalist economy that thrives on commodification of Black females flesh. Time and place is important to BMF and Afrafuturist feminist reading of “Our Time” to interrogate how Black women’s rhetorical practices plays with and disrupts time and place. Queer temporality messes with the notion of history, of historicity, of what counts as history, more so who is seen as a subject of history, a maker of history instead of an object of those histories (of those convergences of power that contribute to our reading of Black subjects as objects) as subjects whose subjectivity is suspended in nexus of sovereign vs. sovereignless which contributes to their status as object. In disrupting time and place, Black women cultivate resources from sites of the subjection to re-imagine their lives, worth, and (re)production on their own terms. In doing so, I argue that Black women’s rhetorical practices place “the procreative inheritance of blackness and [hetero]patriarchy defined motherhood under investigation.”⁸⁴ Theorizing social life in death, for Black women, is only possible through a queer(ing) of time and place. “Our Time” is time that Black women create within the confines of anti-blackness that I argue offers rival time and space to complex considerations of Black mothering and (re)production.

Anti-black heteropatriarchy’s regulation of Black women’s (re)productive lives is sustained through organization of time and place which naturalizes their (dis)possession. I fashioned BMF to directly engage the anti-black contexts that subject Black women through their mothering and (re)production. BMF is different from other rhetorical frameworks wishing

⁸³See for more on queer time, and queer temporality: Judith Halberstam, “What’s that Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (2013): 313-333; John M. Sloop, “In a Queer Time and Place and Race: Intersectionality Comes of Age” 91 (2006): 312-326; Kara Keeling, “Looking for M— Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15 (2009): 565-579.

⁸⁴Alexis Pauline Gumbs, ‘We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves,’ para. 3.

to analyze Black women's practices in that it enables theorizing Black women's mothering and (re)production in the times and spaces they create rhetorically. The spaces that Black women cultivate via their rhetorical practices enable consideration of Black mothering always at odds with anti-black heteronormativity. The socially constructed idea of time and place, in anti-blackness, as natural that secures Black women's subjection are the exact moments in which Black women produce time and place, elsewhere. "Our Time" interrogates the impact of gratuitous sexual violence while also acknowledging the ways they cultivate social life in social death.

To read Black women's rhetorical practices, through BMF, necessitated I imagine a different way to analyze Black women's lives in anti-blackness. Instead of reading Black women's textual contributions as isolated texts, I reread these texts as always already speaking to, with, and against each other. Yes, the conversations Black women are having are occurring in particular times and places however I find it most fruitful to examine the ways these texts speak and produce across time and space. I do not want to analyze these texts as tied to specific time and place because isolating these texts from other Black women's texts obscures the conversations Black women generate across time and space. Therefore, reading Black women's rhetorical practices spatially as opposed to linearly is important as they create their own spaces to define themselves.

Imagining (Re)productive Life in Anti-black Violence

BMF resonates despite the fact that Black women oftentimes support the gratuitous violence inflicted on some Black women while vehemently opposing others. To be quite explicit, I am not under the assumption that all Black women, in consideration of gender and sexual

differences, share the exact same concerns regarding maternity and reproduction.⁸⁵ Nor do I assume that all Black women have or feel an innate desire to bear and mother children. It is not Black women's desire, or not, to have children regardless of their gender or sexual identity and practices that queers Black women's mothering. Rather, Black women's (re)productive lives concerned with strategies that Black women employ to mother self, space, and kinship in gratuitous sexual violence. Black women's legacy of mothering survival and resistance offers an alternative frame to theorize Black mothering and all they (re)produce. I contend that in doing so, we gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities that Black women face without needing to universalize or homogenize a particular set of experiences.

As rhetorical scholars, I argue, we can theorize the particularity of Black women's mothering from various vantage points without assuming that because they are different that they are intent to destroy each other. For Black women, the idea of mothering is about more than just birthing and/or raising children. Hannelore William's documentary on single Black mothers and HIV/AIDS highlights the need for BMF as it brings attention to the complex negotiations Black women deal with as they mother self and others. BMF offers space to interrogate the ways Black women preserve themselves through cultivation their own standards and expectations for themselves. It is in mothering themselves that Black women refashion idea of self and their worth needed to navigate every day, material realities intimate state violence. I envision this project as contributing to an ongoing proliferation of rival spaces of productivity that we can employ, as rhetorical scholars, to theorize about Black women's sexuality, mothering, and productivity.

⁸⁵Alice M. Miller, "Sexual but Not Reproductive: Exploring the Junction and Disjunction of Sexual and Reproductive Rights," *Health and Human Rights* 4 (2000): 68-109; Laura Nixon, "Right to (Trans)Parent: A Reproductive Justice Approach to Reproductive Rights, Fertility, and Family-building Issues Facing Transgender People," *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 20 (2013): 73-103.

As it stands, there are virtually no rhetorical frameworks or methodological approaches in Communication Studies, pertaining to the study of rhetoric specifically that offer what Black Maternal Futurism offers. Unlike frameworks concerning reproductive "rights," "justice" and "freedom," this rhetorical framework does not operate with an assumption that the current political anti-black regime is able to re-assign nor recoup the supposed rights of Black women discourses concerning their mothering and (re)production with an acknowledgement of the anti-black contexts that condition her subjection. What future is there for Black (female) bodies in a political system that architects their entire existence to create a world that denies them any substantial? What future is there in a world maintained through their subjection as nonhuman? What potential is there in a world that necessitates Black women's existence yet denies them full human subjectivity needed to acquire rights and privileges common to the white sovereign subject? What hope is there for Black subjects whose "freedom" (ability to be citizen as acknowledged through white heteronormative rubrics of recognition) comes with the expectation that their status as abject flesh is accepted?

It seems counterintuitive to me to invest even the tiniest portion of myself in such a political system and social world built to profit off the destruction of Black women. I use BMF to examine the ways Black women negotiate attempts to destroy them by cultivating strategies and spaces for them to thrive in anti-blackness. In this chapter, employing an Afrafuturist feminist perspective, I analyze the ways Black women's rhetorical practices challenge the confines of their subjection. More so, I consider the ways Black women's rhetorical practices prompt moments to re-imagine Black women's (re)productive lives in the violence they negotiate. From here, I transition to Chapter Three, to interrogate the anti-black violence that Black women inherit in anti-blackness while considering the ways they strategize their social lives. I explore

themes of subjectivity, gratuitous sexual violence and mothering to demonstrate the ways Black women's rhetorical practices, across time and space, challenge the everydayness of their oppression through (re)production.

CHAPTER THREE: (RE)PRODUCING THE STRANGEST FRUIT

*She who refuses to reproduce the status quo threatens to produce a radically different world.*⁸⁶

Black women's insistence on mothering despite their treatment as fleshly commodities in anti-black heteropatriarchy is a demonstration of their resilience as power. Black mothering is conditioned by compulsory narratives of heterosexual reproduction and racial solidarity produced in violence. That is, the gratuitous nature of violence that Black women are subject to everyday, as it concerns their mothering and (re)production, shapes the ways they mother themselves and others. It is important, as I have argued, to examine the anti-black contexts in which Black women live because it is a direct result of these contexts that impact the ways Black women attempt to protect themselves and their (re)production. In this chapter, I explore the ways Black women describe the anti-black contexts that inform the strategies Black women create for self-preservation. It is important because it is in the various ways that Black women attempt to negotiate their lives that offers alternative, or rival spaces and times to re-imagine Black women's (re)productive labor. I read Black women's rhetorical contributions as queer(ing) anti-black heteropatriarchal narratives as it specifically pertains to mothering and (re)production to consider how they renegotiate their humanity, subjectivity, and personhood, on their own terms.

⁸⁶Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves,' para. 7

Drawing on Black women's public discourses, I use Afrafuturist feminist theory to reread how their texts communicate across time and space. Their discourses, detailing and critiquing the structural constraints imposed on their lives, generate spaces to theorize/re-imagine the complexity of Black women's mothering and (re)productivity. In other words, I explore the ways Black women utilize rhetoric as a tool that challenges narratives condemning their subjection, offering spaces to define, name, and create their own worlds. As they describe the anti-black violence that confronts them, Black women (re)produce their own spaces and times to re-imagine themselves, their power, and their capabilities. This, for me, highlights the ways Black women attempt to mother themselves considering that the nature of their (dis)possession that ensures the violence never ends. Instead of centering a heteronormative conception of mothering, particularly for Black women, that revolves around her care for others, I center Black women themselves. For this chapter, the types of texts I interrogate range from reality television to public speeches and performances to literary fiction to public culture essays to address the ways that Black women's productivity creates/cultivates spaces to negotiate their own sense of Black femininity and personhood. Despite the violence and violation attacking interior/intimate spaces of Black women's lives, they *still* (re)produce strategies for their mothering. Yet, what does it mean to survive yet never feel? More specifically, Black women call attention to, critique and debunk precisely by striving to live lives full of love, support and most importantly, care of self.

Theorizing Black women's mothering, through a matrix of BMF points to the ways these practices develop critical theories concerning the viability of their (re)productivity. I employ Black women's rhetorical practices as moments to examine the assumptive logics that vilify and criminalize Black women's reproduction. Black women's public discourse is rhetorical in that these practices themselves act rhetorically. These decisions, as I argue, come directly resulting

from the anti-black assumptive logics that inform the world's perception and treatment of Black (female) bodies. I consider the ways Black women's discourses concerning the violence imposed on them and around them acts rhetorically. Ultimately, I read these texts as building/developing theories regarding the ways Black women mother all that they (re)produce including themselves and their children in anti-blackness.

Politics of Black mothering operate to elevate white motherhood in anti-blackness. Black women's resilience in mothering, both themselves and their children, despite the contexts that devalue their mothering, disrupts the time and place enforcing their subjection. Time is important here as it is time in which Black women's suffering is imagined and executed that shapes every day conditions of their lives as mothers. Despite white cultural mythologies characterizing Black women as incapable of producing properly (if at all), Black women thrive. The intention here is not to sensationalize or romanticize Black women's lives in such a way that re-centers their abjection. Rather, I focus on the mundane-ness of the every-day, as detailed by Black women, closely examining the anti-woman and anti-queer discourses that impact their mothering. These contexts are essential in attending to the complexities of Black women's mothering and (re)production in anti-blackness. In addition, they are essential because we can only gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their mothering through an interrogation of the anti-black contexts subjecting them. Therefore, employing BMF, I analyze Black women's public discourses bringing attention to the anti-black gratuitous violence that informs Black women's mothering strategies.

The Violence of Black Female Reproduction

The violent conditions of anti-blackness producing normative (mis)conceptions of blackness, for Black women, result in the criminalization of their mothering and (re)production. The violation of Black women's bodies through white heteronormative narratives regarding their

sexual expression, sexual reproduction, labor, and mothering condition their lives in anti-blackness. That is, the narratives produced within the dominant white social imaginary regarding Black women's (re)production remain imbued with logics intended to contain them. Articulations of black womanhood and subjectivity circulated and consumed in white heteronormativity, enforced through gratuitous violence fix Black women's place in an anti-black world. The fixity of Black women's status as nonhuman and their (re)production as criminal calls attention to the everyday nature of Black women's structural (dis)possession. In the everydayness of their subjection, Black women's capacities not just as biological producers but also as producers of physical, intellectual, and emotional/psychic labor is attacked. Conceived in and through exclusionary heteronormative rubrics of gender and sexuality, narratives concerning mothering for Black female reproduction is gratuitously violent.

In calling attention to the everyday-ness of their subjection, I stress that it is the potential, looming threat of violence that impacts Black women's everyday lives whether they are aware of the extent of this threat or not. In anti-blackness, Black women's suffering is not an accident or mere coincidence, it is calculated and strategic. Black women's structural position is suspended in time and place that always already collapses notion of present, past, and future. The contexts Black women name in describing the gratuitous nature of the suffering they face enable deeper, more complicated analyses into the complexities of Black mothering in violence. Black women's status as nonhuman *flesh* sanctions and is enforced through the gratuitous violence imposed on their bodies. The contexts in which Black mothers find themselves mothering are precarious because Black women's sexuality, sexual expression and (re)production have always already been pathologized as criminal. Their (re)productivity, I argue, creates spaces and times in which I re-imagine Black women's mothering in state-sponsored gratuitous violence. (Re)productivity,

as I employ it here, focuses on issues impacting their intimate and public lives which broadly encompass economic and sexual exploitation, sexual reproduction, mothering, intellectual, creative & political labor.

(Re)producing Strange Fruit

Billie Holiday's iconic performance of the popular song, "Strange Fruit," offers a moment to examine the scenes that contain and sponsor Black women's every day subjection. I argue that Holiday's performance highlights the anti-black contexts conditioning Black women's complex lives and their (re)production in gendered blackness. She sings:

Southern trees bear strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. Pastoral scene of the gallant south. The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth. Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh. Then the sudden smell of burning flesh. Here is fruit for the crows to pluck. For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck. For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop. Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁸⁷

I re-read her performance in the context of anti-blackness to imagine the ways Black women negotiate their (dis)possession through their (re)production. The earthly references in "Strange Fruit" help to examine the impact of Black women's structural positioning as nonhuman. Holiday's performance is powerful because it brings attention to the structural dehumanization, disenfranchisement, and mutilation of Black bodies that otherwise remain virtually (in)visible. The song's descriptions of the earth and its Southern trees, bloodied leaves, strange fruit, and sweet flowers are key in understanding the relationship to blackness as it is bound to anti-blackness. Elements of nature bear witness, as expressed through Holiday's performance, to the dehumanization of Black people. More specifically, these elements become tools used to uphold

⁸⁷Strange Fruit. Performed by Billie Holiday. Cafe Society, New York City, March 1939.

the conditions relating blackness to death. It captures the everydayness of Black suffering as Holiday sings about the smells that distinguish this pastoral scene from others. The “rotting smell of burnin’ flesh” is revealed to be as natural as the jovial scent of magnolias. Dropped in the world, “for the sun to rot,” Holiday’s performance calls attention to the scene that contains their subjection.

In this pastoral scene, the distinguishing of smells, such as flowers from burning flesh, serve as a constant reminder concerning the everyday-ness of their subjection. The beautiful flowers serve as the backdrop of rotting, lifeless black flesh “hanging from poplar trees.” The sweetness of the magnolias that lingers in the air does not overtake the bitterness from the burnin’ black flesh. The sweet and the bitter smells, distinct in their own right, work in particular ways to naturalize the scene that Black women produce strange fruit. The sweetness of the magnolias is still distinct, is still distinguishable from the burnin’ flesh that comes as sudden as the breeze that swings the Black bodies post-lynching. The sweetness in this pastoral scene is incomplete without the bitter smell of burning flesh “for the crows to pluck.” The sweet and bitter smells work together to create the conditions of anti-blackness organized around/through the violence that binds Black (women’s) subjectivity to death. Holiday’s of performance “Strange Fruit” offers an interesting lens to examine the relationship between blackness and death that shapes Black women’s mothering strategies. “Strange Fruit” was written by a white Jewish teacher from the Bronx. However, it is Holiday’s rendition of “Strange Fruit” that allows one to examine the space between the world she knows and the material reality she lives as expressed through her performance.⁸⁸ Like a 500-year-old tree rooted in the earth, Black women’s suffering

⁸⁸The man who wrote the song “Strange Fruit” that Billie Holiday performed was named Abel Meeropol. Meeropol, a white Jewish schoolteacher from New York City who was disturbed by the racism in America. See more for background and personal history on Meeropol: Blair, Elizabeth. *The Strange Story Of The Man Behind 'Strange*

runs deep. The song itself, singing about the scene following the lynching of what it assumed to always be a cis-gender Black man does not foreclose our ability to consider how this scene also affects Black women. With their own hands and bodies, Black women continue to risk their lives and spirits to mother all that they produce.

References to fruit, trees, seeds, magnolias, and even mud then are important as Black women negotiate their social lives in social death. For Black women, characterizations of their fruit, their labor as strange offer moments to address the criminalization of their (re)production. The unsteady and imperfect balance between life and death via references to the earth prompt a re-reading of Black women's strange fruit as (re)productive. For instance, in Assata Shakur's autobiography, *Assata*, she makes, from my view, an intentional decision to reference the earth and mud in her reflection about the complexity of life and death for Black people organized by the racist (white) political state.⁸⁹ In her reflection she complicates the normative relationship between life and death that creates the foundation on which (white) human subjectivity emerges in the New World. Earth and death play an important role in explicating the structural subject position from which black subjectivity is conceived in anti-blackness. She writes, "I believe in life. And I have seen the death parade march through the torso of the earth, sculpting mud bodies in its path. I have seen the destruction of daylight, and seen blood thirsty maggots prayed to and saluted."⁹⁰

Shakur's employment of visual references to earth, mud, and the maggots that feed on strange fruit is pivotal in understanding the complexity of the particular pastoral scene Black women find themselves mothering. Assata's belief in "life" despite having "seen the death

Fruit', "NPR Music, September 5, 2012 (accessed October 4, 2016), <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>

⁸⁹Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 1.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 1.

parade” is an instance in which she speaks to her life in social death. The parade marching “through the torso of the earth” draws on the earthly references echoed in Holiday’s performance. The earth that witnesses the strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees is the same earth that Shakur speaks to in her autobiography.

Shakur’s description of the parade is particularly important as it sculpts “mud bodies in its path.” The mud babies’ reference that Shakur mentions does not read as mere coincidence. Her description of the mud babies reads as the material reality that influences Holiday’s decision to sing “Strange Fruit” despite potential risks at the time. The strange fruit that the trees drop, rot under the sun on the ground, eventually absorbing back into the earth. The bloodied leaves of which Holiday sings sculpt what Shakur refers to as mud babies. The connection I highlight between these two women’s contributions is the ways they use the earth to discuss anti-black suffering. In other words, Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” brings attention to the anti-black contexts that Shakur herself negotiates. In negotiating the time and place of her (dis)possession, and the naturalization of black suffering through mud babies’ reference, Assata affirms her own life. The utility of these references to a natural producer, mother of all producers generates opportunities to a more substantively consider the violent conditions in which Black women mother both themselves, their children, and their communities & world.

Deborah Johnson, a Black Panther Party comrade in the 1970’s interviewed about the December 4th raid at her home in 1969 (which resulted in Fred Hampton’s murder) speaks about the ways she and her former fellow Black Panther Party comrades negotiated themselves around the constant threat of being beaten and/or killed by the local police and/or federal agents. While the imminence of violence was a consistent threat in their minds, they refused to let that reality rule their lives. She says, “Now, I’m not going to sit here and say that[s] paranoia, and we were

not afraid, and it didn't mean anything, of course it did. But we didn't let that immobilize us, or stop us from what, we didn't focus, we tried not to focus on that. We knew what we had to do."⁹¹

Johnson highlights the negotiations that remained necessary due to the constant threat of violence. In Deborah Johnson's case, her work with the Black Panther Party critiqued corrupt local and federal political and legal systems, oftentimes in the absence of Black Panther men who were killed, imprisoned, or missing. Black women had to make decisions that ensured their survival to carry on the work of the Party.

Even after Fred Hampton's assassination during the December Raids, Johnson recounts being very mindful that she didn't stumble or fall coming from the back room. Even in describing the police roughing her up in the kitchen where she was forcefully put onto the floor, she is mindful to not make too much movement to avoid giving the police an excuse to kill her. Johnson must navigate this violence while pregnant, with the police having no regard for her or her unborn child. The resilience that she produces in order to not let the "paranoia" concerning police violence "immobilize" her is an example of Johnson's mothering of self to build strength of purpose. Her discussion of how she and her fellow comrades dealt with the pressure alludes to the ways Black women specifically remain resilient as they work to protect themselves and their (re)production. The labor that went into maintaining communal ties with her comrades plays a role in the well-being of Black women's (re)productive lives. That is, the energy, spirit, and strength it required to stay connected and committed in the context of police violence was the means by which Johnson looked after herself.

Remembering that mothering encompasses more than child reproduction and rearing to also include a concern for ways Black women nurture themselves is vital. These women's

⁹¹"Interview with Deborah Johnson," Interview by Terry Rockefeller, Ashington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, October 19, 1988.

products describing the conditions of their lives as Black women mothers them in that it enables them to create and sustain their own versions of self. Johnson's like Holiday's strategies of focus, resilience, and comradeship are a direct reflection of the overtly racist political and law enforcement systems that Black people face. Reading Holiday in connection with Assata Shakur and Deborah Johnson reveals a trend developing among Black women's texts. Across time and space, in describing the contexts of their oppression, Black women are simultaneously fighting back, finding ways to sustain life in social death.

In spite of the pastoral scene structuring their lives in anti-blackness, Black women (re)produce. Despite the seemingly "impossible" odds, Black women live and thrive on their own terms. Like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Well-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, CeCe McDonald, Assata Shakur to name a few, Black women (re)produce as a means to navigate and challenge violence that impacts their everyday lives. In Deborah Johnson's reflections on the Panthers her knowledge that she and other Black Panther Party members were under constant surveillance was one of the means by which they existed under the persistent threat of state sponsored violence. In one moment during the interview she describes the sound of a phone being tapped. She was well aware that local and federal agencies had them under constant surveillance reminding them that antiblackness meant that their bodies were not their own. Particularly evidence in the moments after shots were fired into her bedroom during the December raids as people shouted, "stop shooting, there's a pregnant woman in here."⁹² As she reflects, she talks about the moment she emerged from the bedroom and police began briefly firing shots again.

⁹²Ibid.

Black women's bodies have never been their own even in matters of death, the decision often belongs to someone else.⁹³

Alexis Gumbs' discussion concerning the origins of "race" as an idea established through blood ties is important to think about when considering the complexity of Black women's (re)productive lives. Blood ties and bodily fluids, used as a mechanism that violently maintains Black subjection offers a moment to consider how the birthing of race relies on the violation of Black women's (re)production. Gumbs states:

Messy bodily fluids indicative of the ways race is birthed out from association of blood ties as the ties that connected people together. 'This deliberation of the genomic as a disembodiment of the race category depends on the elision of the racialized woman as a site of reproduction of both the embodiment and the idea of race'...racial domination and reproduction already functions through the violence of penetration on the feminized body.⁹⁴

Ideas of race, conceived in anti-blackness, are born from particular narratives that criminalize both Black women's mothering and (re)production. In criminalizing Black women's (re)productivity, anti-black conceptions of race and racial difference remain invested/embedded in their subjection. Her specific mention of the "messy bodily fluids" and the "violence of penetration" highlights the violence penetrating the "feminized body" produced upon Black women's bodies. Narratives of racial difference and racial solidarity built on Black women's subjection are indicative of structural antagonisms. In other words, Gumbs' emphasis on "messy

⁹³For more on state violence, police brutality, and Black mothering, see: Tasasha Henderson. "The Historical Roots of Contemporary Violence Against Pregnant Black Women," Truthout. May 2016. www.truthout.org/news/item/36205-the-historical-roots-of-contemporary-violence-against-pregnant-black-women (accessed June 1, 2016).

⁹⁴Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn To Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010), 10.

bodily fluids” birthing categories of race, speak to more than just the economic exploitation of Black women’s bodies. The violation of Black women’s (re)production, as asserted by Gumbs, speak to the intellectual, spiritual, intimate, and physical suffering they negotiate. The violence Black mothers witness and experience are not simply symptoms of social inequities but rather a reflection of insidious logics that structurally (dis)possess Black women. The everydayness of structural violence reflected in Black women’s lives is a sexual violence Black women must negotiate.

Black women mother their survival, in part, through their discourse that identifies the structures that violate them. In reading Black women’s public discourses as queer(ing) time and place via their mothering strategies, these texts demonstrate the ways Black women cultivate lives for themselves despite violence. To understand Black women’s rhetoric in such a way requires a simultaneous acknowledgement of the anti-woman and anti-queer discourses that have contributed to Black women’s suffering. Black women’s survival has required Black women to find ways to survive the “impossible.” Briana Perry builds on Gumbs’ assertions in her description of the conditions Black women are forced to negotiate as it concerns their mothering. Perry contends:

As slaves, Black women were forced to reproduce for the maintenance of the Southern economy and the institution of slavery. This often included their slave owners raping them to ensure that there was a ready supply of laborers. Once slavery was abolished, Black women were subjected to involuntary sterilization because they were perceived as a group of people who possessed undesirable traits. They were falsely portrayed and

labeled as hypersexual and sexually immoral individuals—characteristics that were considered antagonistic to “good” motherhood.⁹⁵

Here Perry’s description of the U.S. plantation complex and its logics highlight the ways sexual violence such as racial rape dictated social perception of Black women and their (re)production. In slavery, Black women’s experiences with sexual rape and forced breeding were events that reinforced the treatment of Black women as fleshly commodities. The historical treatment of Black female slaves and the later “involuntary sterilization” of Black women call attention to the manipulation of Black women’s bodies and their bodily fluids to maintain a racialized status quo. The extended reach of the state into Black women’s (re)productive lives as experienced via rape, forced breeding, involuntary sterilization, and criminalizing sexual pathology, across time and space, demonstrates the everyday nature of their state-sponsored (dis)possession.

Black (male) slaves were oftentimes forced or manipulated into engaging in rape of Black (female) slaves reflecting the sexual terror inflicted upon Black (male) slaves as well. Carrying this logic into the 21st century, the sexual violence inflicted on Black women oftentimes come at the hands of Black men. The regulation of Black women’s body parts, in various ways, for particular reasons, in a specific time and place, continue to communicate to Black women that there are not their own. Perry’s discussion of the sexual rape Black women were subject to during slavery informs the scene that recognizes the Black mother as always already criminal. In acknowledging the sexually gratuitous violence that Black women remain open to in the context of economic exploitation we can engage in a more substantive examination of the contexts that shape the ways Black women mother.

⁹⁵Briana Perry, “The Misrecognition of Black Motherhood,” *For Harriet.com*. May 2015. www.forharriet.com/2015/05/the-misrecognition-of-black-motherhood.html#axzz444qE5ZJD (accessed October 4, 2015).

In theorizing the ways Black women (re)produce, we are presented moments to examine the ways Black women understand themselves through the violence they describe; more so, I examine how their naming of political and social structures complicit in their suffering offers space to consider how these contexts impact their mothering and (re)production. The violence that Black women have historically been subject to has merely mutated, strengthened become more insidious over time; however, despite the intensification of control to further criminalize their (re)production, they still produce. Nina Simone and Jill Scott's renditions of "Strange Fruit" in 1965 and 2015 provide additional moments to examine the complexity of anti-black contexts Black women negotiate as it concerns their mothering and (re)production. The fact that Black women find it necessary to continue to sing this song, understanding all that it represents regarding the brutal treatment of Black people, demonstrates a temporal simultaneity of the experience of Black people. Both 1965 and 2015 are moments in American culture when racial tensions peaked and discussions of systemic inequity, discrimination, and violence engulfed the nation. Historical images of police officers spraying women and men with hoses and Freedom Rides link up with contemporary images of police brutality/violence and the Black Lives Matter movement in ways that act as the haunting refrain in Holiday's initial performance; these performances are the encore that never ends.

The Civil Rights protests and demonstrations of the 1960's in comparison to protests and demonstrations that occurred in Baltimore, Maryland following the death of Freddie Gray highlight the chilling scene in which Black women mother. These performances, in line with Holiday's initial haunting performance demonstrate the ways Black women produce in response to an anti-black world. In November of 2015, Jill Scott, a Philadelphia native like Billie Holiday, took the stage to sing her rendition of "Strange Fruit." At the time when Nina covers Strange

Fruit, the Voting Rights Act the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been passed and the inflamed racial tensions that remained created a powerful moment to sing about the systemically inhumane treatment of Black people in the United States. In the wake of the recent passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the political and social climate surrounding Nina Simone's rendition of Strange Fruit was both unchanged and changing. While political legislation was being passed to end the legal sanctioning of racial discrimination in the work place and the voting booth, the conditions in which Black women found themselves mothering reflect the scene the Holiday, Simone, and Scott performances served to challenge. Although the political, legal, and cultural systems (on the surface, superficially) described to be cured and thus absolved of its past transgressions, Black suffering continued. Simone's rendition is a painful yet necessary reminder regarding the most inhumane forms of violence. Moved by Holiday's performance and the sentiments it echoes, Nina Simone says, "That is about the ugliest song I have ever heard. Ugly in the sense that that it is violent and tears at the guts of what white people have done to my people in this country." For Simone to sing such an "ugly" song about the evils of American democracy amidst ongoing state-sponsored violence remains telling of the structural nature of gratuitous violence against Black (women's) bodies. These women's performances, read across different times and spaces, link up in ways that demonstrate the continued fungibility of blackness as violence has mutated, but it has not waned.

The calculated brutality of transnational anti-black(woman)ness that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Jill Scott address through their performances, is burdensome. Their emotional performances address the *chronic dehumanization of Black life*, across time and space.⁹⁶

Reading Holiday and Simone's performance across time and space means that these

⁹⁶Jallicia Jolly, "Mothering While Black: Meditations On Coping With Anti-black State Sanctioned Violence," ForHarriet.com. January 2016. www.forharriet.com/2016/01/mothering-while-black-meditations-on.html#axzz444qE5ZJD (accessed February 5, 2016).

performances are important because they are both responding to the socio-political times they are mothering themselves and their children through. Nina Simone is quoted as saying that “an artist’s duty, as far as I am concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians. As far as I’m concerned, it’s their choice, but I CHOOSE to reflect the times and situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. And at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when everyday is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved.”⁹⁷ Her words demonstrate the importance of “Strange Fruit” in the moments that both herself and Holiday take it upon themselves to “reflect the times.” The fact that these women are employing similar strategies regarding the same issues in different times and spaces highlight the intentional and strategic abuse of Black women via rape and sodomy, isolation, economic exploitation, and sexual pathologization. These scenes within the larger pastoral scene contain Black women by de-humanizing them through a stripping and re-assigning of racial gendered subjectivity always already coded/perceived as improper, unproductive, and powerless. The performance of “Strange Fruit” by Black women is significant. It is their performances of this song that prompt a consideration of how Black women employ their (re)production as a means to help them navigate systemic suffering. I read these performances in connection with Assata Shakur and Deborah Johnson’s reflections alongside Alexis Gumbs and Brianna Perry as they help account for the violence that contributes to what Jallacia Jolly describes as “mothering while black.”⁹⁸

In October of 2015, during the first Democratic debate for the upcoming 2016 election season CNN respondent Don Lemon introduced a clip of Drake University Law students asking, “Do Black lives matter or do ‘all lives matter’?” This question, in response to the mobilization of

⁹⁷Nina Simone interview, interviewed by unknown, Protest Anthology, April 8, 2008.

⁹⁸Jallacia Jolly, “Mothering While Black: Meditations On Coping With Anti-black State Sanctioned Violence.”

the Black Lives Matter movement that successfully disrupted national political agenda, is telling of the social and political milieu concerning the status of Black people in an anti-black capitalist state. In the time leading up to and surrounding Jill Scott's performance of "Strange Fruit" in November of 2015, the U.S. was engulfed in an uncomfortable and yet necessary conversation about systemized suffering, police brutality and violence against Black people. These conversations are comfortable because as progressive as the United States espouses itself to be, it is guilty of horrible acts of state sponsored violence against its citizenry. Black women documenting their experiences in an anti-black patriarchal world reaches across time and space, as represented in texts from Holiday in 1939 to Jill Scott in 2015. Political and legal enforcement systems were forced to address issues to acknowledge long-standing issues of economic inequity, sexual exploitation, and cultural disenfranchisement.

The structural and social struggles between visibility and absence that criminalize and violate Black women become queer(ed) spaces where we can re-imagine Black women as (re)producing. More specifically, it is their capacity for (re)production, as demonstrated through their discourse, thriving in the context of anti-blackness which naturalize narratives suggesting the opposite.⁹⁹ In and through intimate state violence, endorsed by and through political, state and various forms of violations against Black women's (re)production, Black women remain resilient in mothering all that they produce. Considering the various levels, degrees and forms of state 'intimate' violence Black women experience and endure, they're resilience is astounding. When read together, these Black women's performances, although disconnected through time generate rival spaces and times to re-imagine Black women's mothering. These performances,

⁹⁹See for Daniel Patrick Moynihan as an example of how Black women's mothering was criminalized through rhetoric of concern, responsibility, and racial solidarity as it is heteronormatively conceived: United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan, Patrick Daniel (Washington, DC.:United States Printing Office, 1965).

when read together, offer an imaginative way to theorize Black women's (re)productivity; that is, their ability to create and nurture what they produce without interruption or imposition.

The violence inflicted on both the tree and the strange fruit is challenged by Black women who name the scene of their subjection to negotiate life in death. Black women's historical appeal to and involvement in political advocacy and mobilization are strategies they have employed in attempts to redefine themselves, their labor, and their futures in anti-blackness. However, in privileging political strategies as *the* recourse for Black women's liberation, romanticizes resistance in ways that preclude us from thinking beyond politics. Jallicia Jolly asks:

What happens when political mobilization is no longer the default strategy? Or when the pain hurts so much that resistance seems more like a glimpse of fantasy rather than a terror of our reality? When the sea of anti-black(woman)ness swallows your soul in ways that subject attempts for restoration to the nostalgic pastimes of black (female) liberation? Envisioning death in mind, spirit, and/or body as a possible recourse to anti-black(woman)ness yields a critical realization of the power of state-sanctioned violence after death. In considering what happens to life and the living who have been subjected to such soul-killing abuse necessarily invites a meditation on the "What now?" after the petitions have been signed, the protests are done, and the alliances forged.¹⁰⁰

The experiences, horrors, and traumas Black women describe in intimate detail challenges the pastoral scene that abuses and exploits their (re)productivity. As I have argued, the grammars that endorse criminalizing Black women's bodies has an irreversible impact on Black women's (re)production. Simone's rendition in connection to Holiday's performance enable spaces and

¹⁰⁰Jallicia Jolly, "Mothering While Black: Meditations on Coping with Anti-black State Sanctioned Violence," para.12-13.

times, through a queer(ing) of anti-black time and place, to examine ways Black women mother through a violent pastoral scene. It is in the ways that Black women describe the anti-black conditions of their (re)productive lives that call attention to the structural nature of their subjection. Born in death, living in death, Black women continue to name the systems and boundaries that systematically oppress and criminalize Black (women's) bodies. It is clear then, as clear as it is now that the situation for Black people despite the passing of prized public policies and laws has not transformed the anti-black logics upon which these laws are founded. The economic, sexual, and spiritual exploitation of Black women is undoubtedly connected to their mothering as these are the sources Black women draw from/resources they employ to mother within the parameters of an American nightmare. These texts are important because they begin to demonstrate a particular trend across time and space regarding the brutality of transnational "anti-black(woman)ness" that shapes the ways Black women mother.

Black women's productivity, as I read it here, mothers their survival in that it allows them to speak on and about the particularities of their gendered experiences in anti-blackness. Black women's texts thus far, I argue, demonstrate the ways their rhetorics empower them to create their own versions/ideas of Black womanhood through violence that (dis)possesses them. The suffering and trauma that Black women experience is an everyday reminder of their status as "non-human" and therefore underserving of protection and rights. One of the conditions of Black women's structural (dis)possession, as nonhuman, fleshly commodities, is the erasure of Black women's ability to *feel* pain. Kimberle Crenshaw asserts:

At the same time that the image of lynching came to capture racial terror, against which African-Americans revolted, the unpunished rape and abuse of black women across the South was in fact the rallying point for advocates like Rosa Parks, who built an

infrastructure that grounded the civil rights movement. Black women's intersectional experiences of racism and sexism have been a central but forgotten dynamic in the unfolding of feminist and antiracist agendas. Within the African-American community, arguments that sexual harassment was a product of white sexual discourse and that lynching symbolized the essential character of racist terror in effect erased black women from the picture."¹⁰¹

Black women cannot feel pain if they are not considered human in the first place. Their bodies, as Crenshaw notes, are treated as fleshly commodities evidenced by the "unpunished rape and abuse of black women across the South." Crenshaw's contribution is important because it carries on a tradition of Black women naming the transnational anti-black(woman)ness that informs their systemized suffering via sexual abuse and rape. Crenshaw challenges the compulsory narratives of racial solidarity that erase Black women's experiences within the lethal boundaries of anti-blackness. The sexual transgressions against Black women, across time and space, as demonstrated through their discourse, like Crenshaw, are more often than not, left out. Black women's negotiation of binaries of (in)visibility that regulate politics of presence(ing) and absence(ing) has been (re)production. In Crenshaw's quote, she makes specific mention of the ways Black women like Rosa Parks who built infrastructures to support the Civil Rights Movement is significant because of the contexts in which their (re)production takes place. Black women fight to mother all that they produce which includes their ideas and efforts in challenging and disrupting mythical alien definitions that assume they are unable to (re)produce "properly."

Crenshaw's mention of Rosa Parks is significant as she serves as an example in this moment to demonstrate ways Black women mother themselves through intimate state violence.

¹⁰¹Kimberle Crenshaw Williams, "Black Women Still in Defense of Ourselves," *The Nation.com*. Oct 5 2011. www.thenation.com/article/black-women-still-defense-ourselves/.

Rosa Parks exerted time, energy, and labor towards producing as means to disrupt/challenge the status quo. The complex situations and scenarios that Black women are forced to navigate regarding visibility and invisibility through compulsory narratives in anti-blackness directly impacts their (re)productivity. The compulsory narratives of heterosexuality and racial solidarity in both Black women's intimate and public lives reinforce the vilification and shame associated with Black women's mothering. Recognizing the ramifications of the "forgotten dynamics" in Black women's structural suffering, Crenshaw, with the help of Jolly, challenge the time and place violating their (re)productive lives. The anti-black contexts Crenshaw and Jolly draw create space to re-imagine how they negotiate "mothering while black." Ida B. Wells explicitly acknowledges the particular struggles Black women face saying, "I honestly believe I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches."¹⁰² Black women's intersectional experiences with racism and sexism entangled in intra-racial politics fueled by/through the same logics the state employs to regulate their bodies and (re)production. However, despite the violence that Black women experience, they find ways to negotiate its impact through their production. One consistent strategy among Black women is in naming the systems that oppress them in order then to re-imagine themselves in ways unrecognized in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world.

In response to a local morning radio show talk show host Flo Anthony on WDKX-FM, longtime reader of TransGriot's online blogspot, Angela Giaandrea Valentino spoke out about transphobia as it relates to Black trans women specifically. In this quote, Valentino mothers her own rival, expansive notion of Black womanhood as she critiques heteronormative respectability politics that cis-gender Black women reproduce. In critiquing these politics and fictitious ideas of authenticity (who a Black women is instead of who Black women identify themselves as and in

¹⁰²Ida B. Wells-Barnett cited in Paula Giddings. *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (Harper Collins, 2009), 369.

what ways), Valentino's response serves as a moment to examine how Black women mother themselves through violence perpetuated by Black women.

We Black trans women also face sexual assault and genocidal levels of violence aimed at us. We have had our beauty denigrated just as Black cis women's beauty has been under attack by whiteness and white supremacy for the last 400 years. And I and other Black trans women are sick and tired of being sick and tired of hearing out the mouths of jealous cis Black women engaging in femininity policing that we shouldn't be 'representing Black women'.¹⁰³

This excerpt is an example of the ways Black women actively refashion normative perceptions, producing self-definitive versions of black femininity. As a result of the anti-black context Black women find themselves mothering themselves against/in interaction with other Black women. Valentino mothers both herself and Black trans women as she expresses how "sick and tired of being sick and tired" they are of having to defend their femininity and womanhood to cis-gender Black women. The frustrations that she expresses over cis Black women simply being "jealous" create a frame in which she fashions her own idea of her womanhood and femininity, as a Black trans woman, that actively challenges cis-heteronormative narratives of authenticity; narratives, which Valentino calls attention to, that shame Black trans women for their femininity and womanhood are problematic. The complexities of an anti-black world are not just evident in the state's interaction with Black women nor solely at the hands of white people. The complexity of Black women's (re)productive lives is reflected in interactions with other Black women, inflicting various degrees of violence on other Black women. The above quote calls attention to this as Angela Giaandrea Valentino negotiates meanings of Black womanhood as it interacts

¹⁰³Angela Valentino Giaandrea, "Deal With The Fact Black Trans Women Exist," *TransGriot*(blog), Jan 12 2015, <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2015/01/deal-with-the-fact-black-trans-women-exist.html>.

with cis-gender, heteronormative characterizations of Black women that devalue, dismiss, and erase Black trans women's experiences in structural violence. The calling out of Black cis-gender, heterosexual women by Black trans women highlights the consistent violence imposed on all Black bodies as performed by Black women.

In critiquing practices of cis-gender, heterosexual Black women, I read Jolly, Crenshaw, and Valentino employ rhetoric to connect themselves to world(s) beyond anti-black heteronormativity; world(s), in this instance, that generate spaces where Black women re-imagine their own relationship to self and community in intimate state violence. These imaginations are important as they are birthed from the same history and assumptive anti-black logics that contribute to the (re)productive struggles Black women are forced to negotiate. These texts draw attention to the complexity of Black women's lives in anti-blackness as Black women experience often comes at the hands of other Black women.

Ntozake Shange's novel, *Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo*, follows the lives of three sisters and their mother as Black women. The decisions Hilda (the mother) makes regarding her girls is in direct relationship to the anti-black world that criminalizes Black women's bodies through a hyper-sexualization of their flesh. In the following scene, Indigo, sent to the store by her mother to get feminine products, is sexually approached by Mr. Lucas the store-owner. The conversations that Hilda has with her youngest daughter is an attempt to prevent or minimize chances of Indigo finding herself in a situation all too familiar to Black women. Prior to going to the store, Hilda had given Indigo specific instructions not to tell anyone including Mr. Lucas that she was buying these products for herself. Her mother, understanding the reality of sexual rape and vulnerability of her young daughter, tries to talk to Indigo to ensure she stays safe. Of course, the rebellious spirit in Indigo leads her to annoyance as she doesn't understand why her

mother would say such things. Her mother's conversation and Indigo's experience at the store with Mr. Lucas prompts a moment to consider how conversations about shame around Black women's bodies shapes/impacts Black women's (re)productivity.

He wanted to keep looking at this girl, this woman. He wanted to know what she felt like. Indigo heard somebody talking to her. She saw Mr. Lucas coming toward her & somebody talking to her. Telling her to get the Kotex & get home quick. Get the Kotex & get home quick...Mr. Lucas stood in the back of his pharmacy, looking at his S.C. Certification, his diploma from Atlanta University. He knew he might be in some trouble. Didn't know what had got a hold of him. Every once in a while, he saw a woman with something he wanted. Something she shouldn't have. He didn't know what it was, an irreverence, an insolence, like the bitch thought she owned the moon. 'Yeah, that's right.' Mr. Lucas relaxed. 'The whole town knows that child's crazed. If she says a thing, won't a soul put no store in its The South in her.'¹⁰⁴

The decision that Hilda makes in telling her daughter not to speak about what she is going to the store for reflect conditions that make Black women's bodies vulnerable due to racially charged sexual politics informing anti-black heteropatriarchy. Mr. Lucas' movement toward Indigo, as described by Shange in a sexual manner, sheds light on the reasons it is important for Black women to pass on information to their daughters specifically about how best to move through the world. Hilda's communicating to Indigo to "get the kotex and get home quick" reveals more than a mother giving her daughter a simple command. The urgency in her words calls attention to the anti-black contexts that Black women must protect themselves in considering the nature of gratuitous sexual violence. Hilda's fears manifest as Indigo is approached by Mr. Lucas

¹⁰⁴Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (New York City: St. Martin Press), 28-29.

Black mothers mother, both themselves and their children, with the recognition that protecting them completely is impossible. However, despite that, Black women remain resilient in nurturing children on how best to navigate their lives in anti-black structural violence. Their insistence on mothering children, in this instance, highlight the ways that mothering functions as both a practice and a process. In the process of Hilda mothering Indigo on how to retrieve feminine products, the practice of mothering children signals the importance of Black women mothering themselves. In looking to help Indigo navigate the world she still refuses to believe exists, we can read Hilda's concerns for her daughter as an extension of a concern for self. A concern for self, in line with strange fruit metaphor, that compels Black women to nurture young Black children. In other words, Hilda's strategy with Indigo reflects her commitment to mother that which she herself has produced.

In Assata Shakur's autobiography during a moment she reflects on her time in jail, she speaks about a reunion with a Black Panther Party comrade, Simba. In this moment, Shakur's memory of the conversation between herself and Simba demonstrates the complexity of Black women's mothering as indicated by her necessary concern for self with and through others. Shakur recalls:

I was glad about her pregnancy and sad at the time: she was facing twenty-five years. Although i tried to be cheerful, i guess she could see the concerned expression on my face. 'Don't worry,' she told me. 'These people can lock us up, but they cant stop life, just like they cant stop freedom. This baby was meant to be born, to carry on. They murdered Homey, and so this baby, like all our children is going to be our hope for the future.'"¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 87-88.

There is a consistent tradition/legacy of Black women resiliently mothering their (re)productive labor which in this scene includes their children. The ways Black women negotiate themselves as they interact with others and the world impacts the ways they mother themselves especially in moments of sexual trauma.

During a 2012 interview with David Letterman at Ball State University, Oprah Winfrey opens up about her personal past with sexual abuse and rape. The interview was facilitated in conjunction with a workshop series on Ball State's campus named after David Letterman himself, for distinguished professionals. Oprah's narratives about her sexual rape and abuse impact the ways that Oprah mothers herself through her past trauma to become the Oprah we know today. Her (re)productivity, despite the pains from her childhood, is an example of the ways Black women mother themselves to thrive in violence built to destroy them. Her narration of her experiences and the silence she experienced builds on the theme of shame that contributes to fruits of the labors being characterized and treated as strange. The vilification or shame around Black women's bodies and (re)production contributes to conditions Oprah finds herself in as a young child. This speaks to the violent nature of Black girlhood in transition to adulthood which fertilizes the ground in which these trees grow bear strange fruit. The pastoral scene that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Jill Scott summon through their performances cultivate frame in which to think specifically about Black women's (re)production. Oprah states:

So I was sexually assaulted at nine, I didn't even know what a penis was, hadn't seen one, didn't know anything about it. Raped at nine, taken to get ice cream with blood running down my leg, he said don't tell and I didn't. The reason I didn't tell, the reason most kids don't tell, because you know whether its going to be safe or not.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶Oprah Winfrey interview, interviewed by with David Letterman, Ball State Letterman Lecture Series, November 26, 2012.

The narratives demonstrate the uninterrupted nature of sexual violations against Black women. The frequency in which these violations occurred to Oprah Winfrey highlight/address the structural character of gratuitous sexual violence Black women endure. Her being told not to tell anyone and the specific memory of “blood running down [her] leg” as her family member took her to get ice cream offers a moment to acknowledge the everydayness of sexual terror that Black women and girls are always already exposed to. The ways that Black men impose violence on Black women, feeling powerless in relation to white men, do so with an understanding that Black women’s bodies are theirs to control. Critiques regarding racial capital and the exploitation of Black labor glosses over the degrees of intimate violence that Black women experience. Racial rape, subsumed under narratives of lynching and capitalist exploitation of Black (men’s) labor contributes to the ongoing nature of sexual terror. These types of acts, however isolated and distinct they may seem, connected to discourses that perpetuate the criminalization of Black women and her strange fruit. Oprah Winfrey’s story is important as it is one example in which we see the complexity or what the paradox of consent for Black women in perpetual suffering.

In 2013, Alveda King, well-known Black pro-life activist, penned an opinion piece entitled, “How Can Blacks Survive if We Murder Our Children,” on a popular pro-life archival news source, Life News. In this short piece, King identifies a relationship between blackness and death as it specifically pertains to Black women, mothering, and abortion. In condemning practice of abortion, having had one voluntary abortion herself after passing of Roe. V Wade, saying “my mother and grandparents were very sad to know about the loss of the baby. The aborted child’s father also regrets the abortions. If it had not been for Roe v. Wade, I would

never have had that second abortion.”¹⁰⁷ The shame associated from trees bearing strange fruits sanctions the violence against Black women’s bodies in order to keep up appearances of pastoral scene.

My involuntary abortion was performed just prior to the passage of *Roe v. Wade* by my private pro-abortion physician without my consent. I had gone to the doctor to ask why my cycle had not resumed after the birth of my son. I did not ask for and did not want an abortion. The doctor said, “You don’t need to be pregnant, let’s see.” He proceeded to perform a painful examination which resulted in a gush of blood and tissue emanating from my womb. He explained that he had performed an abortion called a “local D and C.”¹⁰⁸

King’s excerpt is one of infinite moments that address the violation of Black female reproduction as the ground upon which Black women’s structural positioning shapes their strategies for mothering. Involuntarily sterilization acts as ceremonial exercise/demonstration of anti-black misogyny’s assumed ownership over Black women and all that they (re)produce. King’s intentional description of the involuntarily sterilization as an “involuntary abortion” is significant as her contribution calls attention to anti-black contexts that always already deny her the ability to make decisions concerning her (re)production. Her doctor’s comment to her that she “[didn’t] need to be pregnant,” and then performing a “painful examination” that resulted in a “gush of blood and tissue,” is an unfortunate example of the ways Black women’s struggle to maintain autonomy over her body, bodily fluids, and (re)production can be taken from her through intimate state violence.

¹⁰⁷Alevda King, “How Can Blacks Survive If We Murder Our Children,” *LifeNews.com*. February 18, 2013. www.lifenews.com/2013/02/18/alveda-king-how-can-blacks-survive-if-we-mother-our-children (accessed December 16, 2015).

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

Recounting memories of the gushing blood and tissue, King's depiction paints a vivid picture of the material realities that Black women are forced to negotiate in anti-blackness concerning their (re)productive lives. More so, her contribution's mentioning of the blood and tissue that was expelled from her body without her consent reveals the striking realities of state-sponsored abuse against Black women in their everyday lives. Doctors and healthcare professionals did not need nor want Black women's consent to act in regards to their bodies and (re)production. Consent, as King's passage indicates, is not necessary/needed by Black women as their flesh is always already considered available for consumption. The idea of consent, in context where the terms means nothing in relationship between Black women and the state, draws attention to the ways narrative of consent in anti-blackness uphold/maintain the status of Black women as nonhuman. The political violence imposed on Black women's bodies through state offer space to explore the utility of Black women's rhetorical practices and what they contribute to public discourse and rhetorical studies. How else do we gain and produce knowledge about the complexities of authority and power, organized through anti-black capitalist modalities/logics, without interrogating the lives substantially impacted?

King's re-counting of her experiences is an example of the alternative ways that Black women construct notions of Black femininity as (re)productive. While the content of King's Black pro-life speeches also points to the implications of white heteronormative discourses and its sexual political economies shape Black mothering in context of racial violence. This speaks to the ways that Black women's discourse/texts last survive beyond the physical death of their creators. Black women's mothering is queer(ed) by Black women's discourses in that the ways they negotiate their survival requires a queer(ing) of survival, a renegotiation of life within death. In other words, Black women's methods for interacting with anti-black logics queer(s) their

mothering in that it aims to disrupt the production of time and space in which Black women, as subjects, are invented/recognized. Survival, for Black women, is queer(ed) in their discourses in that the survival they advocate for is not “bare life” but rather for the fullness of life; a fullness of life that reimagines Black women’s self-determining power over their (re)productive destinies.¹⁰⁹ King uses rhetoric as a mean to reiterate the power she assumes over her mothering and (re)production even as she revisits the traumatic memory of regarding her “involuntary abortion.” Despite strategies that Black women employ to navigate sexual terrors that reinforce their economic socio-political exploitation, Black mothers remain fearful over the unknown futures for themselves and their children. For Black mothers, there is no such thing as “outside anti-blackness” as they are forever situated in the logics that sanction gratuitous sexual violence on them.

The experiences that Black women mother themselves through is a direct reflection of the sexual trauma, abuse, and violations that these women experience in anti-blackness. The idea here is not that all Black women will experience sexual abuse and rape in the ways some Black women have and detail their personal experiences. Rather, what interests me is the fact that not all Black women have to actually experience this violence in order to understand the ways state intimate state violence shapes Black women’s (re)productive lives. The fact is that Black women are always open to the possibility of sexual violence which shaping their non-human subjectivity reflected in narratives depicting Black women as lazy, deviant criminals who are assumed to (re)produce improperly. So, it does not matter whether or not Black women, as individuals, experience sexual trauma directly/personally. The potential of violence haunts Black women’s subjectivity in gendered blackness is productive of the self.

¹⁰⁹Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

For Black women, sexual abuse and trauma works in alignment with white heteronormative sexual politics that provides the foundation on which white motherhood is celebrated. I argue that Black mothers' direct confrontations with anti-black violence equips them with knowledge that helps them to mother themselves and their children. Mothering, for Black women does not equate to survival nor does it change the structural conditions bearing down on their lives. In devising these strategies, Black women understand that the situations they aim to transform may never change. However, Black women's discourses detailing the conditions of their (dis)possession simultaneously provide moments for them to reflect upon and navigate gratuitous sexual violence. Suffering, as Black women's discourses suggests, is complex as the means by which Black women mother sometimes kills them. Black mothering is messy and not necessarily always positive and productive in the ways one might hope or like based on expectations set for White mothers to uphold/perform. In emphasizing the times and spaces in which Black women mother, I argue that this messiness reflects the anti-black conditions in which Black women live.

Fear and Mothering Strange Fruit

Hartman speaks to the messiness I allude to as she discusses the strategies that Black female slaves employed to preserve themselves and protect their (re)production. Her contribution is important as it calls attention to anti-black contexts that Black women strategize survival and life in structural violence.

Mothers, disavowing their lives, have called their children *donkor* (slave) in order to save them, while slaveholders have called their property 'beloved child' in order to protect their wealth. Mothers plead with the *kosanba* to remain in the mortal world and not to return to its spirit mother, and masters command the slave to stay put and forget all

thoughts of the mother country, the natal land. Come and stay, child, they both implore”¹¹⁰

Black mothers’ fears, described by Hartman, reflects a particular type of sexual politics ran on Black women’s suffering. The fears that Black mothers have, as it specifically concerns their children, directly inform the types of strategies they employ to protect their childrens’ futures. Black mothers who call/speak of their children slave, to Konsaba,” with the hopes that the spirit mother will spare herself by way of sparing her child. It is in “disavowing their lives” that Black women attempt to save their “beloved child[ren]” by calling them the very thing that prevents these mothers from being able to protect their children. Black mothers who plead with “konsaba” do so in hopes to keep their children in the “mortal world.” For the mothers that Hartman speaks of, the only “wealth” that Black women possess is the love for their children. Intentionally marking their children as “donkor” is one example of the ways Black women strategize their mothering in the specific time and places to protect their (re)production which includes their children. Part of Black women’s suffering, that Hartman’s passage alludes to, is the fact that a central tenet in their suffering is the violation of them as (re)producers. In violating, denigrating, and criminalizing Black mothers, the complexity of their situation is reflected in the fact that suffering always already impacts their (re)production.

Mothering in Intimate State Violence

For Black mothers, their reality is that they are raising children in a world that always already thinks of them to be deviant. They are living in a pastoral scene that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Jill Scott’s performances envision as scene built on the (dis)possession of their flesh. A (dis)possession that is incorporative of their violation as (re)producers. It is the pastoral

¹¹⁰Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York City: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 86.

scene, that details/speaks to/reveals the structure of Black women's (dis)possession embedded in the describing the lynching of an assumedly Black man. I read Hartman as calling attention to the particular kinds of anti-black contexts that force Black women to negotiate their mothering and (re)production navigate everyday-ness in gratuitous sexual violence. The scene itself must be the same scene that we interrogate the ways Black women's inheritance of violence is renegotiated through their mothering and (re)production. A deeper, more nuanced consideration of the scene that Black women mother in requires a recognition of the white heteronormative, misogynistic sexual politics that characterize their fruit as "strange." For instance, Black children are assumed and treated as deviant, despite class distinctions and material wealth because the "tree" from which they are produced is already condemned as inherently criminal and deviant in their sexual nature. Violence, as I have argued thus far, is the an organizing principle that structures the inheritance Black women receive in anti-blackness. Black mother's fears stepped in sexual politics that define Black women's as the standard against which the definition of "good" mothers becomes coherent within U.S. civil society.

Anti-black heteronormative sexual politics play a role in the structural (dis)possession impacting Black women's mothering. Normative sexual politics render, as I have discussed, Black women's (re)production as criminal. The criminalization of Black women's sexuality and (re)production impact the ways Black women mother in anti-black heteropatriarchy. The pathological criminalization of Black women enables the continuation of systemized suffering which all work to elevate white mothers' reproduction and mothering. In doing so, as Alexis Gumbs reminds us, the biologically determinant narratives criminalizing and shaming Black women for (re)producing give birth to normative conceptions of race and racial difference. Therefore, I argue that the criminalization of Black women's mothering and (re)productivity

uphold mythical, alien definitions of Black (woman(ness) as nonhuman and underserving of protection and rights to their own bodies. Black women's treatment and perception regulated by the sexual politics in white heteropatriarchy that confirm the anti-black assumptions concerning the quality of her life and her mothering. Sexual political economy in current the anti-black political state assumes that Black women are always already unable to live and mother properly. I specifically examine Black women's mothering of children as an example to illuminate structural issues associated with "mothering while black."

In April of 2015, columnist Altheria Gaston addressed the particularities of Black mothering through a consideration of the difficulties associated with in raising Black children especially Black sons. During the Baltimore Uprising in Baltimore, Maryland, Toya Graham finds her son participating in the protests over the death of Freddie Gray. Out of fear that her son could meet a similar end like Freddie Gray, Toya Graham is recorded slapping and hitting her son pulling him away from the protests. The circulation of the video of Graham hitting her son was met with mixed reactions, she was praised and simultaneously vilified for her actions toward her son. For instance, Baltimore Police Commissioner, Anthony Batts, was quoted as saying, "I wish I had more parents who took charge of their kids tonight."¹¹¹ Some people were celebrating her actions including white mothers who did not understand the historical contexts informing her and decision to chase him away from protests considering the killing of Freddie Gray that prompted the uprisings. While the focus on police and state violence against Black men eclipses and obfuscates opportunities in the mainstream to consider the complexity of Black women's suffering, I read Gaston as speaking to the relationship between the politics that criminalize Black mothering and (re)production that also supports state violence that kills Black children.

¹¹¹"Baltimore mom who smacked son during riots: "I don't want him to be a Freddie Gray." CBSnews.com. April 28, 2015. www.cbsnews.com/news/baltimore-mother-toya-graham-on-why-she-smacked-son-i-dont-want-him-to-be-a-freddie-gray/ (accessed February 12, 2016).

In a culture of domination everyone is socialized to see violence as an acceptable means of social control... Many times, Black children are assigned mature or grown-up statuses before their time, which then justifies treating/judging/punishing them as adults. This incident provides us an opportunity to discuss why severe punishment is more tolerable for Black children than other children.¹¹²

Gaston's comments are significant because she directly addresses the dehumanization of Black women through the treatment of their mothering and their (re)production, including their children as criminal. The state-sponsored that violence Black women navigate is a condition of their lives as mothers. The ramifications of this violence are that Black women's mothering is used to prop up the sanctity of white motherhood. The very idea of a "bad black mother" is redundant and a "good black mother" does not exist. Black women's mothering is bad, there is no distinction of "good" and "bad" as it applies to Black women. Gaston reinforces this as she questions why "severe punishment is more tolerable for Black children than other children." Brittney Cooper addresses the brutal treatment of a young Black female student by a resource officer at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina.

...the student sits quietly at her desk, and remains unresponsive as the officer Ben Fields asks her to come with him. He takes her silence as refusal, at which point he grabs her by the neck, pulls her backward in the desk, forcibly pulls her out of the desk and then slings her body across the classroom. He then yells at her, as she lies prone on the floor, to put her hands behind her back...What struck me and many others with whom I spoke on social media, was the quiet resolve of the young girl who was attacked, as she saw the office escalating...It is almost as if she knew his brutality was coming, almost as if she

¹¹²Altheria Gaston, "Mom of the Year?," *ForHarriet.com*. April 30th 2015. www.forharriet.com/2015/04/mom-of-year-real-reasons-why-people-are.html#axzz444qE5ZJD (accessed January 4, 2016).

were steeling herself for the blow, almost as if she was no stranger to having somebody with power put his hands on her, almost as if she were sure that no one would stand up to protect her.¹¹³

In problematizing the mistreatment of young Black girls in U.S. public schools, she draws a connection between the “unholy marriage of carcereality and education.”¹¹⁴ Cooper calls the school-to-prison pipeline into question regarding young Black girls specifically because of their vulnerability “still plays almost no role in public policy discussions about the need to reform school discipline.”¹¹⁵ The critique that she raises concerning young Black girls and issues with school discipline speaks directly to the anti-black contexts that criminalize Black women’s (re)productivity. Black children perceived and treated as the strange fruit that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Jill Scott sing about in their performances. The ways the video circulated in mainstream media reinforces assumption that the only way to deal with Black children is through employment of violence as means of social control and discipline. The disciplinary issues associated with young Black girls, in addition to the mistreatment of young Black boys, confirm anti-black assumptions that Black women cannot (re)produce “properly.” Therefore, the mistreatment of Black girls in schools work to confirm anti-black heteropatriarchy’s narratives that perpetuate the idea of Black women’s (re)productivity as strange.

Black children are perceived and treated as the strange fruit that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Jill Scott sing about in their performances. The way the video of Gaston circulated in mainstream media reinforces assumption that the only way to deal with Black children is through

¹¹³Ibid.

www.salon.com/2015/10/28/she_was_guilty_of_being_a_black_girl_the_mundane_terror_of_police_violence_in_american_schools/ (accessed November 6, 2015).

¹¹⁴Cooper, Brittney. “She Was Guilty of Being a Black Girl: The Mundane Terror of Police Violence in American Schools.” Salon.com. October 28, 2015.

¹¹⁵Ibid., para.5

the employment of violence as a means of social control and discipline. Black children are perceived as strange because they are the fruits born and dropped from trees on which Black bodies swing, and die. Born from “lazy,” “irresponsible,” “selfishly greedy,” Black children are “wild,” “difficult,” and in need of severe punishment to “get them on track.” The strangeness associated with Black children considering the skepticism regarding their biological origins creates conditions in which these children are characterized as problems needing to be solved. Gaston’s comments on issues Black mothers face as it specifically concerns rearing children in the time and place implicitly endorsing the school to prison pipeline and prison industrial complex draw attention to their struggles with “mothering while black.” The state’s involvement in punishing Black children is indicative of the ways Black women are shamed for mothering because it is always already assumed that they fail to do it “properly.” Crime statistics and mainstream media news coverage incessantly displays faces of Black criminals layered with commercials for dryer sheets that smell like springtime and NBA basketball game is intentional.

In Black women’s everyday lives messages that communicate to them that they are incapable of taking care of themselves “properly” let alone their children. Gaston’s challenge against the ways Black children are punished in comparison to white children highlights some of the conundrums Black women face. Black women’s participation in these debates on the one hand is necessary as these become the spaces where Black women redefine what it means to be a Black woman and a Black mother in anti-blackness. On the other hand, some Black women’s participation in these debates that perpetuate anti-black(woman)ness through discourses on sexuality, mothering, and labor operate in part by inflicting violence on other Black women. The violence Black women inflict on *each other* is complex and not quite the same type of violence inflicted upon them *as* Black women, these varying types of violence condition Black women’s

experiences with mothering and (re)production. It has been important historically that Black women speak on behalf of themselves in regards to who they are and what they produce however their employment of and complicity with mothering expectations in white heteronormativity does not change anything structurally. As the springboard from which value is assigned to white motherhood, the structural (dis)possession of Black women via their mothering and (re)production endows white women with rights through denial of those rights to their Black female counterparts. Rhetorics the regarding the politics of respectability that governs white motherhood in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world are taken up by Black women who renegotiate these politics in relation to their lives as Black mothers. Here, I refer to the politics of “good” and “bad mothers” established upon the chronic dehumanization of Black women’s lives as mothers. The “good” and “bad” binary contains no meaning when applied to Black women in anti-black heteropatriarchal world. There is, in essence, there is only *the* black mother. The black mother, as I speak of it in its mythical form, is the archetype of what it means to be a “good” white mother and a “bad” black mother. White women, whether they are characterized as good or bad, unlike Black mothers, they are not in jeopardy of losing or being stripped of gendered subjectivity.

The complexity of Black mothering is riddled with constant anxiety and fear in light of the contexts that leave their children vulnerable to various forms and degrees of intimate state violence. Gaston’s fears, rooted in a fundamental distrust of the criminal justice and law enforcement systems remain eerily in tune with Holiday, Simone, and Scott’s performances of “Strange Fruit.” Audrey Stewart, a member of the organization Mothers With a Vision, reiterates Gaston’s concerns saying, “As mothers of black children, we want to see a world where our children are safe and valued and grow up knowing their lives matter,” going on to say, “For

generations in this country, it has been mothers picking up the pieces of state violence against communities of color and leading the charge to defend their families and children.”¹¹⁶ Black women’s fears of their children rotting, either in prison or in the ground dead, constantly shapes the ways Black women maneuver themselves and their children in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world. Simply knowing that Black women and their children have no actual protection, despite hopes expressed by Stewart, from a system that publically espouses to be about protecting all citizens merely demonstrates the nonhuman ontological status that Black (women’s) bodies occupy.

The historical legacy of state-sponsored violence such as police brutality and coerced sterilization all have a direct impact on Black women’s (re)productive lives. So much so that, I argue, Black women develop strategies as means for negotiating the violence naturalized around them. The three performances of “Strange Fruit” provide means to connect and read these texts as producing rival narratives regarding the (re)productivity of Black women in uninterrupted structural violence. The gratuitous sexual violence surrounding Black women and (re)production fertilizes the seed from which these trees and their strange fruits grow. For Black mothers, the other consistent element in scene of constant, unimaginable violence, the fact is that fruit still grows. Despite the treatment of Black women’s (re)production as “strange,” Black women remain resilient in mothering themselves and all that they produce; it is that which they produce, that which they have dominion over, charged to protect, simply because it is theirs.

Still, the harsh realities of violence that Black women recognize as their everyday lives does not make their mothering easier or less complicated. For instance, in the following passage,

¹¹⁶Audrey Stewart cited in Lazare, Sarah. “‘Our Kids Are Being Killed’: On Mother's Day Weekend, Moms are Rising Up for Black Lives.” *CommonDreams.org*. May 9, 2015. www.commondreams.org/news/2015/05/09/our-kids-are-being-killed-mothers-day-weekend-moms-are-rising-black-lives (accessed February 8th).

Ariel C. Williams describes a conversation she has with her young son about police officers who kill young Black boys.

I half-smiled and briefly explained police brutality to my son over breakfast. With knots in my stomach, I explained to him the best way I could that sometimes, innocent, unarmed Black boys are killed by police officers and anyone else who hates Black skin. With a toy gun in his hand—similar to the one that cost 12-year-old Tamir Rice his life (I’ve since thrown it away)—he looked at me with confusion and sadness. The same look I can imagine Brown and Rice had before taking their last breaths.³⁵

This is an interesting moment to interrogate the sexual politics characterizing Black women that lend themselves to gratuitous violence inflicted on young Black boys. The unimaginable-ness of such acts against boys for being Black that confuses and saddens Williams’ son acknowledges the impact of gratuitous sexual violence on Black women’s (re)production. In this particular passage, Williams’s frank conversation with her son about systemic racist police violence draws attention to the ways normative sexual politics inform the exploitation and erasure of Black women’s (re)productivity in anti-blackness. Sexual politics that criminalize Black women, vilifying mothering practices, impact both Black women and the Black children their limbs bear. The naturalization of these pathological narratives, similar to the pastoral scene depicted in “Strange Fruit,” continues to demonstrate a recognition and pattern of violence that plays a role in Black women’s every day. The intimate state violence, like in Williams’s case, compels Black women like Beth E. Richie to speak out about the inability of criminal system to protect and resolve issues for Black people. Richie asserts:

³⁵Ariel C. Williams, “I Had to Explain Police Brutality to My Young Son... and It Hurt.” *ForHarriet.com*. December 15, 2014. <http://www.forharriet.com/2014/12/i-had-to-explain-police-brutality-to-my.html#axzz444qE5ZJD> (accessed January 4, 2015).

While we study and deliberate about women's abuse, it is important for black women working in the battered women's movement to address the special problems associated with having to depend upon the criminal system as a vehicle for protection and problem resolution.³⁶

She forwards this assertion citing that the criminal justice and law enforcement systems have been the worst offenders in perpetuating structural violence against black people. The fears that manifest in Black mothers' is not social paranoia and it is not "playing the victim" or the "race card." It is their constant lived reality as Black women. The well-publicized murders of young black children like Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Mario Woods and Jordan Davis, for instance, fertilize the conditions that continue to give birth to a particular type of fear. That is, a fear that can come true in an instant such that they, as Black mothers, are powerless in stopping their fears from becoming their nightmares. Their understanding of the ongoing nature of violence they and their children are always already exposed to and the fears that impact Black women's mothering are rooted in historically structural violation of Black women's bodies and all that they produce. Once again, the strange fruit reference begins to gain additional layers of meaning as Black women's mothering is constantly positioned in the defense when it comes to protecting what they can never fully protect.

The scene in which Black women (re)produce, as I have argued, is built on the mutilation of black flesh; so much so, that the violence accrued against Black men implicitly reflects/comments/alludes to the violation and shaming of Black women's (re)production through white heteronormative sexual politics. The well-publicized murders of young black children like Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Mario Woods and Jordan

³⁶Beth E Richie, "Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black Community," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995, 398-406.

Davis, for instance, fertilize the conditions that continue to give birth to a particular type of fear. That is, a fear that they can come true in an instant such that they, as Black mothers, are powerless in stopping their fears from becoming their nightmares. Their understanding of the ongoing nature of violence they and their children are always already exposed to inform the fears that impact Black women's mothering rooted historically in structural violence. Once again, the strange fruit reference begins to gain additional layers of meaning as Black women's mothering is constantly positioned in the defense when it comes to protecting what they can never fully protect. The scene in which Black women (re)produce, as I have argued, is built on the mutilation and blood of black flesh; so much so, that the violence accrued against Black men implicitly reflects/comments/alludes to the violation and shaming of Black women's (re)production through white heteronormative sexual politics. The shit is rigged against Black women from the start. This, as demonstrated across Black women's (re)production, has not changed.

Closing Chapter Thoughts

We can re-read moments of shame imposed on Black women and that Black women express as operating rhetorically, creating spaces to address the racial rape and interior/intimate violence Black mothers must negotiate in the context of sexual terror. The lack of attention and invisibility conferred through mediated discourses particularly silence Black women's particular experiences with racial rape. Black women's rhetorical practice here brings attention to how shame is implied through absence/silence. In the next chapter, I analyze the ways Black women cultivate religions of self-care as a means to mother themselves and their children within a state of gratuitous violence. More specifically, I interrogate the ways Black women create discourses regarding their resilience, spirit, and energies as frames that enable a rhetorical re-imagining of

Black women's mothering. In doing so, I argue that we can engage more substantive conversations about the (re)productive issues that Black women face in an anti-black civil society.

CHAPTER FOUR: BLOOD AT THE ROOT

A Black woman was fair game for anyone at any time: the master or a visiting guest or any redneck who desired her. The slave master would order her to have sex with this stud, seven with that stud, for the purpose of increasing his stock. She was considered less than a woman. She was a cross between a whore and a workhouse. Black men internalized the white man's opinion of Black women. And, if you ask me, a lot of us still act like we're back on the plantation with a massa pulling the strings.¹¹⁷

Haunted by the fruits of their own labor, and the scene that deems their labor “unproductive,” Black women’s lives remain intimately entangled with violence that seeks to destroy them. “The blood on the leaves and blood at the root” gains additional meaning as it provides space to consider the multiple forms of structural violence that impact Black women’s mothering. Blood ties, messy bodily fluids giving birth to the idea of race, and Black women’s sex histories inform the particular strategies they create to negotiate anti-black violence. By sex histories, I refer to Black women’s sexual and erotic intimacies, expressions of their sexual desire, and their sexual traumas. The physical exploitation of Black women’s bodies as sexual objects for White male plantation owners also contributes to shame produced around their (re)production. Black female slaves, learning how vulnerable they were to sexual predation, made decisions to mother themselves with understanding it may never end. The manipulation and exploitation of Black female messy bodily fluids, severing all ties to other slaves (baby, child and, or adult) has produced a culture of shame around Black women’s sexual expression and sexual transgressions against them. The historical violation of Black women’s (re)productive

¹¹⁷Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 1.

labor haunts Black women as they look to assert their sexual and erotic desires. Black women's blood ties and sex histories bring attention to the complexities of their (re)productive lives in gratuitous sexual violence. The manipulation of Black women's bodily fluids manifests in logics organizing the culture of shame surrounding Black women's sex histories.

In this chapter, I examine the ways Black women negotiate manipulative blood ties and criminalized sex histories attempting to weaken, harm, and destroy them. The complexity of Black women's suffering in anti-blackness severely impacts the ways Black women find it necessary to mother themselves and their children. For the sake of analysis here, I understand these experiences through two broad yet particular categories that condition Black women's experiences in anti-blackness: *isolation and shame*. These categories, I argue, offer moments to examine the everydayness of (re)productive violence Black women experience in an anti-Black world. These categories are important as they call attention to white heteronormative sexual politics that condemn Black women's (re)productive labor including their roles as mothers. The suffering Black women experience in their personal/intimate lives is, while not direct action of the state, still a form of structural violence. The intimate state violence inflicted on Black women then is not just perpetuated through political and law enforcement systems, it is also found in their intimate dwellings and homes. Intimate state violence, as I employ it here, speaks to the multi-dimensional nature of Black women's struggles for (re)productive life. Intimate state violence allows for more nuanced interrogation into the everyday lives of Black women forced to contend with material, intimate realities of gratuitous sexual violence.

In focusing on two broad yet particular categories of experiences, I analyze the ways Black women understand isolation and shame as playing a role in shaping their lives as they understand them. Black women's texts offer moments to consider the multi-faceted nature of

their sexual, intimate and psychic oppression as it details the particular conditions they are navigating. Black women's lives are complex because they are negotiating their sexual lives and sexual traumas in both public and intimate spaces. Situated in the scene that Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Jill Scott sing to, across time and space, Black women's interactions with the state are reflected in their experiences in their personal, private lives. Black women's inability to consent in a world where protection & safety are denied to them both in their public and intimate/personal lives point to the violent inheritances that they receive as Black women. Beth E. Richie says:

After a period of time, I gradually realized that some of these strong, culturally-identified families, which we had been supporting so vehemently, were dangerous places for some women to live in.¹¹⁸

Here, in context of challenging the racist political system and sexual oppression, Ritchie calls attention to the intimate forms of violence that play a role in Black women's suffering in anti-blackness. In other words, the violence that Black women experience in their personal/intimate lives reinforces their structural (dis)possession. The multi-layered complexity of Black women's suffering from both the state and from within their own homes and intimate lives require deeper interrogation into the assumptive logics that criminalize their (re)production. I analyze the ways Black women's discourses challenge the authority of these logics by naming, critiquing, and refashioning the boundaries of their (dis)possession. From here, I consider the way isolation and shame function as logics that impact Black women's (re)productive lives.

¹¹⁸Beth E Richie, "Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black Community," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995, 398-406.

Isolation

Isolation, as I employ it here, refers to the convergence of structural antagonisms that endorse the destruction of relational ties among Black and brown bodies. In speaking on how anti-black power structures function, I consider isolation here in regards to how anti-black heteronormative formulations of family and mothering were built around relational ties denied to Black women. For Black mothers, isolation is characteristic to their mothering in that the historical ramifications of Black children being torn from their mothers and mothers being denied any rights to their children was legally sanctioned. The physical separation of Black women from networks of care that include their children demonstrates the ways that anti-woman and anti-queer discourses regulate their (re)production. The idea of family and blood-ship (blood tie based kinship networks) is complex for Black mothers as some mothers and/or children are denied recognition and space. Here, isolation enables consideration of the ways Black women mother despite physical separation from networks of care/support systems such as blood/biological mothers.

Manipulation of Blood Ties

In the following excerpt, Sojourner Truth highlights the ways Black women's sexual reproduction, in contexts exploiting their physical labor, regulated assumptions concerning their mothering. Black women, forced to reproduce children who were then separated and isolated, points to the ways their productive and (re)productive labor was exploited simultaneously. In this moment, Truth draws attention to and challenges the ways her mothering was denied her in slavery. The impact of her separation and thus isolation from her children impacts/shapes Black women's experiences in gendered blackness; more specifically, her brief quote articulating the reality of isolation has a direct impact on assumptions circulated about Black women's (re)production. Truth proclaims, "I have borne thirteen chilern, and see 'em mos' all sold off to

slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'n't I a woman?¹¹⁹ Truth's proclamation remains indicative of the ways Black women's subjectivity is regulated through exploitation of their (re)production. The ability of slave masters to separate her from her children offer a particular frame to consider the structural nature of Black women's suffering as mothers. In 1971, Angela Davis re-emphasizes Truth's critique from 1851 stating, "Mothers and fathers were brutally separated; children, when they became of age, were branded and frequently severed from their mothers. That the mother was 'the only legitimate parent of her child' did not therefore mean that she was even permitted to guide it to maturity."¹²⁰ The consumption of Black women's bodies without their ability to consent contextualizes the fears that Black mothers attributed to the impacts of violence in Black women's everyday lives.

In Bethany Veney's autobiographical account, *Aunt Betty's Story: The Narrative of Bethany Veney, Slave Woman*, she calls attention to the everyday sexual violence that separates Black mothers from their children, rendering them powerless over their own (re)production. Veney's lived experiences in relation to anti-black directly impacted her mothering strategies. She reveals:

Several months passed, and I became a mother. My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother's emotions as she clasps her new-born child, and knows that a master's word can at any moment take it from her embrace; and when, as was mine, that child is a girl, and from her experience she sees its almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave-owner, and feels that the law holds over her

¹¹⁹Sojourner Truth, "Woman's Rights." Presentation at Women's Rights Convention, Akron, OH., May 1851.

¹²⁰Angela Davis, "Myth of the Black Matriarch." *The Black Scholar* 1, (1971): 8-16.

no protecting arm, it is not strange that, rude and uncultured as I was, I felt all this, and would have been glad if we could have died together there and then.¹²¹

The sexual politics that secured Black women's status as nonhuman impacting their mothering highlights the contested relationship between absence and presence which functions in anti-blackness to isolate and destroy any resemblance of relational structures between Black mothers and their children. Veney highlights the contexts of her life as a mother by describing how her life differs from white mothers, saying "you can never understand the slave mother's emotions." Her declaration that "my dear white lady" can never understand her life as a mother speaks to more than just parental rights. The reason that white women can never understand, according to Veney, is because of the gratuitous sexual violence that structures Black slave women's lives. The constant fear of sexual abuse and violence at hands of slave-owners with their "unbridled lust" is the frame through which Veney affirms the particularities of her (re)productive life. Barbara Smith attends to the landscape of gratuitous violence for Black women saying, "...the bodies of murdered women are strewn across the landscape of this country. Rape is a national past time, a form of torture visited upon all girls and women, from babies to the aged."¹²² For Black women, the hyper-presence of her sexual body and the perpetual absence of Black flesh is normalized and maintained through sexual politics criminalizing Black mothering and (re)production. Veney's recognition of the potential, yet probable likelihood that her daughter will experience sexual abuse, shapes her mothering as she says she "would have been glad if we could have died together there and then." Black women's mothering and (re)production, therefore, is shaped by the violence historically designed to destroy any and all traces of

¹²¹Bethany Veney, *Aunt Betty's Story: The Narrative of Bethany Veney, Slave Woman* (Worcester: Page County Heritage Association, 1889), 26.

¹²²Barbara Smith, "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 251.

Blackness. Layered with contestation between presence and absence is the idea of consent and protection as gratuitous sexual violence operated with the assumption that these words did not possess the same meaning as it did for white mothers.

The contested relationship between presence and absence demonstrated through the exploitation of Black women's (re)production as discussed by Truth, Davis, and Veney, does so on the grounds that Black women were unable to consent or protect their own bodies. While Black women were acknowledged for giving birth to Black babies, this recognition, highlighted by Davis, did not mean that they "were even permitted to guide it to maturity." Important in these examples is the way that normative conceptions of ownership and citizenship that entitled white slave owners to uninterrupted access to Black women's bodies and all that they produced. Ownership, as is the case in Truth and Veney's narratives, sheds light on the structural grammar through which Black female slaves are treated as nonhuman, fleshly commodities. The sexual violence against Black female slaves operates as a ceremonial ritual in which characterizations of Black women as animal, wild and nonhuman are confirmed and corroborated. Despite the mythical caricatures that criminalize Black women's (re)production, women like Truth challenge isolation sponsored by/through violence arguing that she is a "woman too." It not just that she is a woman too, it is more specifically that she is a woman even in her blackness that makes her deserving of the same rights conferred to white mothers.

The demolition of relational ties, or rather the devaluation and dismissal of Black relationality is the fertile soil from which Black women's mothering is pathologized. The feelings of isolation brought on from brutal separation and the contested relationship between presence and absence irreparably shapes Black women's mothering of themselves, often times through their children. Isolation as I read it through these particular examples addresses the

psychic, emotional and mental violence Black women suffer. Truth's reality that she has "borne thirteen children, and see 'em mos' all sold off to slavery" was done without her consent because her consent was not needed. For fleshly commodities, as Black women have and continue to be treated, there are no relations to be recognized. Categorized as nonhuman and coded as wild animals, Black women had no claim to their children because they were marked as such in opposition to the status/position of white male slave owners. The destruction of relationships among black slaves, even in its most heteronormative state, contributes to feelings of isolation Black women experience through their interactions with gratuitous violence.

For Sojourner Truth, her racially gendered identity denied her any ability to protect herself and her children from the violent torture and abuse that was the only future guaranteed as fleshly commodities. Isolation, for Black women, is not simply a matter of being denied rights to mother children but also a right to gendered, human subjectivity. Hortense Spillers and Sabine Broeck call attention to the gendered identity imposed on Black women that does not award them the full rights and privileges awarded to white women's mothering.¹²³ The practice of separating children from mothers is an example to consider the structural isolation of Black women through gratuitous sexual violence. Structural isolation refers to the ways gratuitous sexual violence presupposes and naturalizes a mythical distinction between full (white) human subjectivity and Black women's nonhuman subjectivity, granting white mothers rights that Black women's suffering enables. Angela Davis' contribution is significant here as she addresses the implications of Black women's nonhuman subjectivity. The implication, for Davis being that Black women could birth Black children but they were not recognized as mothers in the ways white women are praised. The destruction of relational ties between Black bodies through

¹²³Sabine Broeck, "Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology through Black Feminist Critique," *Gender Forum* 22 (2008): 1-4.

dehumanization, in its normatively gendered form, engenders the violence and suffering Black mothers are forced to negotiate.

However, the isolation that Black women experience does not stop them from cultivating their own conceptions of femininity and mothering. Their resilience is evidenced in the choices they make to navigate the world they understand themselves to be living in, built on their backs and at their expense. For instance, Veney's preference of death for her and her daughter is a moment I argue we can see Black women negotiating the gratuitous sexual violence that haunts their everyday lives. So, Veney's saying, "it is not strange that, rude and uncultured as I was, I felt all this." The preference for death considering the parameters of what life entails for her and her children has a direct impact on the ways she mothers herself and her child. Birthed in death, living as dead, for Veney, death is the only choice that ends the threat of sexual violence. This passage calls attention to the everyday-ness of the sexual violence Black women are subject to in connection to the exploitation of their physical labor. The presence of their hyper-sexualized bodies that consumed the minds of white men and black male slaves fundamentally erased any trace of their sexual violation and mutilation. Black women's discourses that build on and draw from assertions forwarded by their Black foremothers like Harriet Tubman, Bethany Veney, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Miller Stewart disrupt anti-black conceptions of time and place by challenging the parameters/boundaries/limits of their (dis)possession. These texts work rhetorically in that they highlight the ways that isolation and separation sustain the gratuitous violence conferred on black female reproduction. Rhetorical texts produced by Davis and Truth, across time and space, contribute to a theory of (re)productivity as it pertains to Black mothering and maternity. There is opportunity here to re-imagine the legacy/lineage of Black mothers as spaces to theorize Black women's (re)productivity.

Queering Time and Place in Intimate State Violence

Rhetorical practices produced by Black women, speaking to the dimensions of their suffering, offers alternative spaces to construct rival Black femininity around their (re)production. In disrupting the scene that engenders the gratuitous sexual violence, and the temporal and spatial dynamics of their suffering, Black women's rhetoric (re)produces itself by queer(ing) the time and place of the scene of subjection that dehumanizes them. Their texts signal to a queer(ing) in time (that their (re)production generates/enables) which I employ as a guiding frame to examine the complexities of Black women's mothering in perpetual violence. These texts, produced by Black women, read across and through queer(ed) time and place, use the pathological narratives to envision an alternative/rival way of understanding themselves as mothers through intimate state violence. It is in the ways that Black women's discourses are challenging the anti-black heteronormative laws violating their (re)productive lives that queer the time and place in which Black women redefine the world around them.

Lifetime Television's reality show "Bring It," offers a moment to consider how Black women's (re)productivity disrupts politics of time and place that inform Black women's obstacles as mothers in anti-blackness. In this scene, Crystianna (a dancer) and Rittany (Crystianna's aunt) speak after Rittany and Crystianna's coach Miss D get into an argument. The various ways Black women mother, young adolescent Black girls, disrupts anti-blackness as these mothers nurture their girls in particular ways to ensure their futures and professional careers. Rittany and Miss D get into a heated exchange because Rittany has grown tired of Miss D picking on Crystianna, yelling at her in practice. Miss D yells at all the girls however in the scenes prior to the altercation and the conversation after it, Rittany speaks about her noticing Miss D calling out Crystianna's name more than usual. As one of the mothers of the heavy

hitters on the team, although Crystianna is the youngest on the team (at the time), Rittany has become accustomed to hearing other girls' names like Sunjai being yelled at for messing up routines. Unsettled by the amount of times Crystianna is spoken to by Miss D in front of the team compels Rittany to interrupt practice explicitly telling the coach that she will not talk to Crystianna "that way." After Rittany and Miss D exchange a few words, she tells Crystianna and Rittany to both leave her studio as one of her biggest rules is that no parents come into the Dollhouse (the name of her disrupting her practices. Following the blow-up, Rittany and Crystianna sit in her car and they talk about what happened and why Rittany acted the way she did with Miss D.

I'm just tired of this team, Crystianna. It don't make no sense. I'm tired of Dancing Dolls, I am tired of Dianna. Dianna gone too far. Why do you wanna be on this team, for her to make you cry?...Dianna don't love you like I love you...since you came into my life, you been my main priority. When everything else go wrong, you make it better. I just want you to do good in life...You don't understand, I bust my ass so you can live a life I really know nothing about. I want you to have every opportunity in the world. I give you what I don't have, you the air I breathe.¹²⁴

From Rittany and Crystianna's private conversation, Rittany's personal transition from Black girlhood to Black womanhood has shaped the ways she mothers Crystianna. Her feeling that no had been there for her, to guide and protect her is why Rittany is passionately invested in ensuring the same is not true for Crystianna. Rittany's argument with Coach D over how she speaks to Crystianna highlights her love for her niece, even though Rittany frequently calls Crystianna her daughter, it is also indicative of the ways Black women's lives significantly

¹²⁴Bring It!. "Battle in Memphis." 02. Lifetime, March 12, 2014.

impact their mothering. Rittany's description of her adolescent years is important in understanding both her interaction with Coach D and Crystianna. Rittany's admittance that no one was there for her in the way she is trying to be there and support Crystianna is telling. For Black women specifically, the gratuitous sexual violence experienced through isolation informs/shapes Rittany's desire to give her niece/daughter a life she personally knows nothing about.

The choice to be for Crystianna what no one was for her, from Rittany's experience, is not actually a choice at all, it is automatic and inherent considering what Rittany has been through. Rittany has been there for Crystianna since she was born and is relentless in making sure that Crystianna not only has a supportive and nurturing environment but that she also has a future. For Crystianna, dancing is all she has ever wanted to do so Crystianna and Rittany's investment in the Dancing Dolls paralleled with Rittany's passion are attempts to break the cycle regarding the absence/lack of maternal figure. Isolation as an element of anti-blackness, shapes Rittany's determination in making sure that Crystianna has a future that she herself will never know anything about. Mothering is important to Rittany because she knows the impact of and feeling isolated. As such, she sees it as her responsibility to ensure that Crystianna stays on a particular path, diverging from the path that Rittany (and fellow moms Tina and Selena) had taken.

It is Rittany's love for her niece that leads to her arguments with Miss D and the other mothers, telling Crystianna "you're the only thing that I love, I don't love nothing else."¹²⁵ Rittany's tendency to be protective over and defensive of Crystianna in relation to the Dancing Dolls coach and the other moms, can be read through her brief statements concerning her personal background to show how experiences of isolation impact Black mothering. More

¹²⁵Ibid.

specifically, Rittany's experiences of isolation from any maternal figure remain indicative of the particular types of violence that Black women remain exposed to and shaped by. In this case, it makes Rittany, like the other moms, extremely "hands-on" often times getting into arguments, over whose child will win the performance solo for the week. Despite the arguing that transpires between the mothers, even that seems to be rooted in a particular type of comradery as Black mothers. The judgments from other Black mothers draw attention to the varied experiences that Black women have had and how those experiences manifest in various mothering choices. Black women are making choices about their mothering which are future-oriented that counteract past experiences that stigmatize and devalue Black women. Quite often, the Dancing Doll mothers will say things like "we are a family," "we may fuss and fight but we are a family," and "we got each-others backs." While the relational comradery these mothers show and share is important it does not mean that these arguments do not have a range of impacts.

Selena's personal background, in a manner similar to Rittany's, shapes her mothering strategies in season one specifically as she struggles to help her daughter make the Dancing Dolls' battle squad. The battle squad is the elite dance unit that competes in head to head dance competitions called Stand Battles. Relatively new to the Dancing Dolls and the DDP (Dancing Doll Parents), Selena's mothering strikes a discordant note with the other moms. The other mothers oftentimes speak of their irritation over Selena's exclusive focus on Sunjai (Selena's daughter) as the Dancing Dolls is a team sport. More than that, what bothers the mothers are the things Selena does say during practices and how she supports Sunjai at competitions. For instance, in one scene, Selena is seen wearing heels and bringing heels for all the moms to wear to support Sunjai who has a difficult performance that required she dance in high heel shoes. During another competition, when Sunjai finally makes the battle squad (to be cut from the

performance during warm-ups), Selena brings a number of ballons to cheer on Sunjai. These particular moments among others lead other moms like Mimi, Rittany, and Tina to imply that Selena is “doing too much.”

By “doing too much” they mean the ways that she chooses to support her daughter are over the top and excessive from their perspectives. At one point, Selena gets in an argument with Miss D who refuses to let Sunjai perform a pom-pom routine yelling, “I just want my daughter to perform, I just want my daughter to perform!”¹²⁶ In this same scene Selena goes on to say, “Nobody pushes Selena around. They think because I look like this that I am sweet. I am naturally sweet but still, I’m not gonna let you run over me.”¹²⁷ Episode-to-episode, especially in the first season, we see Selena get into several different arguments with fellow DDP mothers regarding how she particularly supports and pushes her daughter. She herself admits “that she can act a little crazy when it comes to my daughter but I only want the best for her.”¹²⁸ Her approach in trying to ensure that her daughter gets the absolute best in consideration of what Selena didn’t due to her becoming a mother at an early age is tied to her personal history. Selena’s discussion of her personal history, similar to Rittany, has had a particular impact on how she mothers herself through her children. Selena’s discussion of her personal history demonstrates that gratuitous sexual violence shapes Black women lives and has a direct impact on how Black women mother themselves and their children. More so, it provides additional example to consider the futuristic nature of Black women’s mothering in anti-blackness. Selena states:

¹²⁶Bring It!. “Battle in Memphis.” 02. Lifetime, March 12, 2014.

¹²⁷Bring It!. “The Wig is Off.” 03. Lifetime, March 19, 2014.

¹²⁸Bring It!. “Battle in Memphis.” 02. Lifetime, March 12, 2014.

Sunjai is 16 years old. When I was her age, I had a two year-old. I had my son when I was 14 because, you know, my grandmother raised me. She didn't teach me about boys. All it takes is one time, one time and that's what it took.¹²⁹

For Black women specifically, as Brittany Cooper reminds us, black girlhood is a violent process. It is sexually violent in ways that oftentimes are outside of Black women's control. For Black mothers, like Selena who look to provide the best for her daughter by paying the dues to be on the competitive team is an opportunity for her daughter to do things that she never could because she had a child at such an early age. Selena says, "I want her to do much better than what I did. I want Sunjai to just stay focused on dancing. I don't want anything to stand in her way."¹³⁰ Black women's historical struggles with mothering, particularly poor and working class Black mothers, are not manifestations of a simplistic understanding of social inequities. Selena's enthusiasm concerning Sunjai and her future, which at times is even too much for Sunjai, allows Selena to mother herself in relation to her past saying, "I'm living through her a little bit, she's my first daughter. She's my mini me."¹³¹

Both Rittany and Selena's personal histories speak to the ways that a contested relationship between absence and presence impacts young Black girls and the decisions they make regarding mothering in the future. Understanding the ways that violence leaves its traces on Black mothering and maternity, it is important to consider the contexts in which this violence is passed on from generation to generation. It is important in relation to Rittany and Selena, and the other DDP's as the mothers frequently get into arguments with each other regarding how they mother their children. They also, on occasion have arguments with Miss D concerning how she is coaching the girls as they prepare for their competitive dance performances. Isolation, as

¹²⁹Bring It!. "Sunjai in Stilettos." 05. Lifetime, April 2, 2014.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Bring It!. "Battle in Memphis." 02. Lifetime, March 12, 2014.

an element of Black women's (re)productive lives, directly informs the development of practices to mother themselves and their children in relation to the perpetual suffering marked by the structural positioning of the Black and the gratuitous violence that constitutes that positioning. These Black mothers know that if they do not attempt at ending intergenerational cycles of isolation experienced in anti-blackness that their daughters could end up having the same experiences they had. Even Miss D, who herself talks about the lack of a mother figure and role models guiding her when she was younger, and uses her own past to inform her coaching and mothering strategies. The ways that we are seeing Black women mother themselves through their mothering, in this case, of their children is indicative of the necessary relationship between the past, present, and a futurity defined by its productivity in rebuilding the self.

Shame

Building on the notion of isolation, as a condition of anti-blackness, shame is intimately tied to the obstacles Black mothers face. The shame that conditions Black women's lives in anti-blackness harkens back to the ways Black women were shamed for the gratuitous sexual violence imposed on them despite being unable to actually offer consent. The shaming of Black women's bodies is directly connected to the sexual exploitation of Black women's (re)productive labor. Shame, as I employ it here then, refers to sexual violence inflicted on Black (women's) bodies, the violation of a Black maternal lineage articulated through white heteronormative sexual politics. I stress the significance of shame when theorizing Black women's mothering because it offers a complex, textured lens to examine the ways shame conditions their experiences in anti-blackness. More specifically, it provides context to theorize the ways Black women balance negotiating mothering self and children in structural violence. The production of shame around Black women's (re)production and mothering is a mechanism in which white women's mothering is protected and heralded as the epitome of true "womanhood."

At a conference on sexuality at Widener University, Feminista Jones' keynote address discussed the shame surrounding Black women and their sexual expression. In line with Beth E Richie's earlier contribution, alongside narratives like Oprah Winfrey, Feminista Jones problematizes sex in Black households, saying:

I found growing up Black that Blacks aint wanna talk about sex. We had sex but we aint wanna talk about it. We had it in a lot of really wrong ways. We aint wanna talk about those wrong ways.¹³²

Jones quote speaks to the shame Black women experience around Black (female) sexuality as articulated through heteronormative sexual politics in a society that constitutes narratives of purity, beauty, and healthy sexuality through the negative dialectic created by the feminized Black body. Shame, expressed through normative sexual politics, perpetuate Black women's suffering in that Black mothers attempt to protect their daughters from what could be described as a wild spirit, or more directly attempts to seek out sexual freedom. The young Black female character Indigo, from Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, provides an example of the practices by which Black mothers shame their daughters' sexual behavior in an attempt to protect them. Thus creating a cycle of intimate violence in which generations of Black communities and families condemn Black women's sexual expression. Black mothers who are overly sexual, or read as excessively heterosexual are coded/characterized as "bad mothers." Shame around Black women's sexual expression intimately tied to the criminalization of their mothering and (re)productivity. The hyper-sexualization of Black women's bodies historically has contributed to the development of Black women's strategies that aim to defy the assumptions

¹³²Feminista Jones, "Keynote Address." Presentation at 8th Annual Careers in Sexuality Conference, Careers in Sexuality Conference, Widener University, Chester PA, October 23, 2015. Accessed October 25, 2015.

concerning their sexual expression, mothering, and (re)production, while simultaneously limiting Black women's everyday experiences of their own sexuality.

The notion of ownership as a means of authority within Black women's homes, building from logics of slavery, creates the conditions that punish Black women for sexual abuse imposed on them. This, speaks to Feminista Jones' observations about silence around sex politics in Black homes asserting, "We had it in a lot of really wrong ways. We aint wanna talk about those wrong ways." To speak about sex in the home meant also bringing up past sexual trauma such as abuse and rape that were assumed better off simply forgotten. To be a "good strong Black women" meant that she was to take her abuse and suffering, at the hands of Black men in silence as she helped them work for their political autonomy and citizenship. To speak of family sex histories and perceived shame, from family members, was and still is regarded as "inappropriate" or "out of place." If we do not talk about the historical sexual abuse of Black women through individual Black women's experiences, then we can forget/deny these acts ever happened. In acting as if this moments never happened or that we have moved on past those moments, it is often times a way to deny power/authority of oppressors over Black men and women. However, the reality is that the silencing of conversations about sex, tied to family histories of sexual violence and violation, impacts the ways Black women mother themselves and children.

Negotiating Life in Gratuitous Sexual Violence

During an interview with Reina Gossett regarding a recent workshop at Brown University on organizing and allyship, Rheem Brooks asks what had impelled her to get involved in the trans prison abolition movement. Although Gossett talks about the prison industrial complex, I read her comments as speaking to the gratuitous sexual violence that specifically impacts Black trans women's (re)productive lives. Gossett responds saying:

It doesn't feel like one answer. It's probably a lot of things, but one was my own experiences with myself or family members, like being policed or incarcerated, or held in different institutions forcibly, and just my experience of that and trying to make sense of it. And I found that being a huge experience for me, really navigating and holding a lot of shame about those experiences or feeling really isolated and not knowing that other people were navigating them and not knowing how to connect about them. It's a whole bunch of people just being really ashamed that they and their family members had come in contact in a very wide range of ways with the prison industrial complex.¹³³

Gossett highlights the interconnectedness between feelings of shame and experiences of isolation and the ways Black women's everyday lives is shaped around navigating these feelings and those experiences. The anti-black contexts that Gossett negotiates, as it specifically concerns intimate state violence and incarceration, as a Black trans woman, bring attention to the ways shame impacts her (re)productive life. Although Gossett is referring to those experiences that deal with the prison industrial complex and not mothering specifically, the shame she recalls impacts her decision to get involved with LGBTQ and trans prison abolition movements. Gossett's emphasis on the "forgotten and erased ancestors" in the queer and trans liberation movements challenges the time and place that renders Black queer and trans women specifically as unable to "produce properly." Rheem Brooks question about why Gossett has gotten involved in trans prison abolition is a moment where I argue she mothers herself through shame by (re)producing rival notions of self, community, and kinships committed to resisting the silence, erasure, and shame around Black queer and trans folks experiences in intimate state violence. Imani Brown, a member of the Black Youth Project argues, "We [cis-gender black women] know what its like to

¹³³Reina Gossett, interviewed by Rheem Brooks. BlueStockings Magazine: Reina Gossett on Magic, Remembrance, and Trans Prison Abolition, April 13, 2015.

be erased. Yet we are also guilty of enacting that violence.”¹³⁴ Fellow member, Cherno Biko reinforce Brown’s assertions saying, “There are black trans women leading the movement, and we need your support. We shouldn’t need to do sex work to fund the revolution.”¹³⁵ Black queer and trans folks “heightened level of interacting with the state” leaves them particularly vulnerable to intimate state violence, has a substantial impact on their (re)productive lives. The gratuitous violence that Gossett addresses that queer and trans folks experience through the prison industrial complex is sexual. For Black queer and trans communities, police surveillance and incarceration are mechanisms by which the state maintains/upholds heteronormative rubrics of recognition, that always already erase/silence them. The normative sexual politics that read Black queer and trans bodies as “abnormal” are due to the perceived rejection of anti-black heteropatriarchal law. The perceived rejection of heterosexuality and gender normativity shape Black queer and trans folks experiences in the prison industrial complex. This short excerpt is significant in that it offers rival/alternative constructions of Black femininity, in the context of intimate state violence, that enable more expansive considerations of Black (re)productivity that always already consider queer and trans Black women.

The intimate nature of gratuitous sexual violence that Black women experience and endure inform anti-black assumptive logics characterizing their fruits as “strange.” The recent and nationally publicized murders of Black boys and men and lack of focus on Black trans women’s murder rates shines light on the structural relation-less relationship with death that black women’s flesh remains bound to in anti-blackness. Black women’s discourse detailing these violent conditions, through time and space, disrupt anti-Black conceptions of time and

¹³⁴Imani Brown, Black Youth Project 100, "We [cisgender black women]..." in 2015, by Meredith Talusan. *Buzzfeed*, 2015, para.6.

¹³⁵Cherno Biko, Black Youth Project 100, "There are black trans women..." in 2015, by Meredith Talusan. *Buzzfeed*, 2015, para.6.

place mobilized via by black suffering. Like trees rooted in the ground, Black women's structural position as nonhuman is permanent. The fears birthed from the reality of Beth E. Ritchie's assertions contribute to the pain of Black women like Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Mike Brown who laments, "Everybody want me to be calm. Do you know how them bullets hit my son? What they did to his body as they hit his body? They don't care. They ain't never gonna care."¹³⁶ The fears of Lesley and countless other Black women mothering Black children generates space to simultaneously examine the ongoing gratuitous sexual violence that punishes Black women for mothering. In order for Black women to be ideal mothers, they have to not be mothers at all however Black women still embrace mothering in all its difficulty, messiness, and violence.

Narratives always already viewing Black women's (re)production as "strange" and thus deviant and criminal by nature render the cries of Black mother's, like Lesley McSpadden silent. After all, their failure to protect their children from harm is the justification that continuously denies Black women rights and protections granted to white women in anti-black heteropatriarchal world. The sexual shame cultivated around Black women's sexuality shapes the terrain in which Black women mother their (re)productive lives.

Sexual Shame and Criminalization of Sex Histories

In Shonda Rhimes hit ABC television show, *Scandal*, the main character Olivia Pope's love life and sexual partners continue to be the center of discussion since its premier in 2012. A former White House employee who worked closely with the President, viewers come to learn the depth of Olivia Pope's relationship with her now former employer. Fitz, the President, and Olivia fall in love during her time working for him during his bid for Presidency. There are a number of dynamics that play a role in the shame produced around Olivia Pope. Rhimes is celebrated as

¹³⁶Lesley McSpadden, "Everybody want me to..." in 2014, by Trey Sanchez. Truth Revolt, 2014, para.4.

viewers appreciate the fact that there is a Black women as the main character of a major television show that is “flawed” character, lending to her believability as a complex representation rather than a caricature of Black womanhood. Black women viewers appreciated the fact that there was a Black women who could be successful in her professional life and a “mess” in her personal life. This resonates with Black women viewers especially because representations of Black women fail to capture the complexity of their lives; Olivia Pope’s character is important as she serves as one mediated example committed to character development of a Black woman’s life.

Anti-black heteronormative sexual politics around Black women’s bodies and lives has spurred a number of mediated presentations that valorize the extremities of their lives. By extremities, I mean those conversations about depictions of Black women revolve majorly around respectability politics that praise the Claire Huxtables of the world and shame the “Basketball Wives.” The politics of respectability surrounding Black women’s bodies continues to highlight contested relationships between presence and absence through Olivia Pope’s storyline. On the surface, one might identify her successful career as what marks Olivia as present in the frame and her sexual body as absent due to her notoriety. However, despite her successful career in Washington as a “fixer” of/for political problems, a majority of discussion around Olivia Pope is always who she is sleeping with. Fitz, who is married to Mellie is one layer of complexity that contributes to shaming of Olivia, both in the fictional world and in real life. Another layer of complexity that contributes to shame that conditions Black women’s lives is the racial dynamics surrounding Olivia and Fitz’s secret relationship. In one particular scene, Fitz requests Olivia’s presence out in the woods, where he is currently networking with fellow politicians, to talk. Although Olivia huffs and puffs and demands to know what he wants, the

presence of the Secret service sent to accompany her, convinces her to meet him. After some back and forth between the two about both business and who is in Olivia's bed, Fitz walks toward Olivia and the two begin to kiss. Despite the two white Secret Service men in extremely close proximity, Fitz is seen as trying to undo Olivia pants to have sex with her. Recognizing his efforts, she pushes him away intensely saying, "I am not yours. I don't show up places because you want me. I am not yours. This is over."¹³⁷

The violence imposed via mediated representations of Black women in the media has an impact on the continuing ways that Black mothering is criminalized. Even in the images that are promoted as depicting the "flaws" such as Olivia Pope who is successful and surrounded by a small group of people/employees who love and support her, she is in love with the Fitz, the married white male president who uses his power as such to arrange secret meetings/rendezvous with Olivia. Even Olivia's relationship with Jake, another white male character, starting in season two are moments in which Olivia's Black(woman)ness is shamed by someone she is in a sexual relationship with. Jake says, "I'm so tired of being our father's son, but you don't get tired do you? You just keep going, spreading like the plague. How does someone so brilliant and as accomplished as you not know what you are? Who you are."¹³⁸ Grieving after Rowan, her father, murdered Jake's wife as retaliation, Jake's words run deeper than just a lover scorned. Him calling her the "plague" and "spreading everywhere" implicitly reads in line with readings of Olivia as a whore who sleeps with married white men. Even in Olivia's agency to choose her partners in light of her professional success does not mean that she transcends the grammars set up to always already read her as a "whore." Despite Olivia's professional success and prestige, the majority of the show focuses on her intimate relationship with Fitz, she is still the whore.

¹³⁷Scandal. "Hunting Season." 10. *ABC*, October 18, 2012.

¹³⁸Scandal. "Even the Devil Deserves a Second Chance." 7. *ABC*, November 5, 2015.

Despite her economic standing, wearing her tailored white suits and drinking her fancy red wine in her fancy wine glasses, she is still the whore. More than a whore, Olivia Pope is a Black woman who feels shame. While the storyline roots her shame in one regard, there is a way we can interpret the dialogue as carrying on a legacy of shaming Black women. So much so that Black women inevitably begin to shame themselves.

The decisions that produce shame in Black women as a result of shame produced about Black women still treats Olivia Pope as a “whore” regardless of her professional success. It does not matter what she does for a living as anti-black narratives articulated through normative sexual politics always already view Pope as hyper-sexual; her hyper-sexuality is the ground upon which Pope’s (re)productivity is not enough to overcome the grammars that make her character intelligible. Olivia Pope’s sleeping with a married man who is white and also the President are not the dynamics that by themselves produce shame. The shame is produced about the moral and ethical integrity of Olivia Pope’s character because she is a Black woman, her sleeping with a married white man simply reinforces/justifies what the audience already knows. How else are Pope’s flaws, celebrated by some, understood as something worth celebrating? How does Pope’s appeal, considering the historical treatment of Black women in the media, remain intelligible across audiences? How do we understand the importance of seeing Olivia Pope’s flaws if not through the narratives set up to contain/sterilize how we think about the complexity of Black women’s lives? I argue that the shame embedded in perceptions and assumptions about Black women, as played out through Kerry Washington’s character, enable discussions of Olivia Pope as “beautifully flawed.” Olivia Pope is not beautifully flawed because she is sleeping with U.S. commander in chief who is married, she is beautifully flawed because she is a Black woman. The

silent narratives of white heteronormativity as played out through Pope's character shame her long before audiences find out she is sleeping with a married man.

In the new hit ABC television, *How To Get Away With Murder*, Shonda Rhimes depicts the life of a prominent Black female attorney and law professor, Annalise Keating. In this scene, Annalise arrives at Nate's apartment, her on again off again lover, to offer her condolences over him losing his wife. This scene is important because it is once again a Black women's lover who delivers the blow of reality that Black women are evil, self-serving, and conniving. Images of Nate virtually dehumanizing Annalise is "deserved" because of her previous decisions that landed him in jail. Despite everything they have been through Annalise shows vulnerability as she confesses to Nate that she misses him, teary-eyes as she stands in the doorway. His response, in that vulnerable moment is to tell her that she is not worthy any one's love. Blaming Annalise for distracting him, preventing the time he could have spent with his wife, Nate tells her:

I don't hate you, I just don't care about you. I gave Nia those pills because I loved her. And I laid next to her in that bed, held her as she fell asleep. So close I could feel when she took her last breath. No one's ever gonna love you that way.¹³⁹

I look to this scene to consider the ways this interaction confirms what we already suspected about Black women which thus helps this scene make sense. In other words, the pre-assumed disposition, nature, and behavior of Black women is confirmed implicitly in Nate's comments as articulated through Annalise. In Annalise's case, her infidelities with a married man lead him to being arrested and framed for a crime he didn't commit. In the aftermath of him being freed of all charges, his conversation with Annalise, after the death of his wife becomes telling. While we might read this dialogue, in line with the storyline, as judgment Annalise deserves as a result of her actions/decisions, there is something more there. Considering the particular ways that shame,

¹³⁹How to Get Away With Murder. "Two Birds, One Millstone." 6. ABC, October 29, 2015.

in connection to isolation and erasure, subjects Black women through their sexuality, there is always something more there. What does it mean for a Black woman to hear the words, “no one will ever love you that way” and she supposedly deserves it? Cinematically what rhetorical tropes does this scene between a Black man and woman “confirm” about Black women through fictional storytelling? More so, how do these images gain and maintain meaning as dictated by dominant rhetorical tropes of black female sexuality, mothering and reproduction?

These images shame Black women for being sexual, erotic beings and mothers as a condition of their lives in anti-blackness as nonhuman. Jill Scott’s performance of “Strange Fruit” in recent times especially hauntingly creeps back into view as the pastoral scene she sings about is preserved through the re-circulation of these images. While shows like *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder* offer is more well-rounded storylines and character plots for Black women characters, that alone does not/will not structurally liberate these characters in the ways assumed in normative (white) social imaginaries. Olivia Pope’s profession does not resolve the structural antagonisms that always recognize her as hyper-sexual thus a whore. Her actions that align with normative conceptions of a “whore” which only further cement the structural position that occupies, even in this fictional world. To read her complexity as the key to Olivia’s transcendence from structurally dead to full human subjectivity would be to both underestimate the true complexities of Black womanhood in anti-blackness and overestimate the power of recognition in perpetual, never-ending structural violence. For Black women mothering in anti-black heteropatriarchy, their agency is always tampered by the sexual politics of shame that criminalize Black women’s bodies and all that they produce.

For Annalise, the confirmation, by a former lover whom she is now on the “outs” with, that she is unlovable and that she is a horrible person does more damage than to a fictional

character's ego and heart. In this moment, the interaction between her and her former lover confirms what we already assumed about Black women. In other words, this scene is intelligible because of the already existing scripts that code Black women as an array of presupposed characteristics and behavioral traits. So, the confirmation of this by her Black lover masked as good, solid drama actually *is* good drama, in white social imaginaries based on the grammars of black suffering embedded in character development and complex storylines. The praise or celebration of complex storylines and complicated life situations, while historically significant in mainstream media, perpetuates the criminalization of Black women's bodies; and with that, the continued (dis)possession of Black women and all they produce. In virtually every single aspect of their lives publically and privately/intimately Black women's (re)productive labor is exploited and their sexual bodies shamed.

The exploitation and disenfranchisement of Black women's (re)production through time and space, organized in anti-blackness, shames Black women for being Black women. Black women's mothering, as I understand it, is always already a response to structural (dis)possession that shapes ways Black women are able to renegotiate their lives in perpetual suffering. These renegotiations do not end the shaming of Black women however they create spaces to re-imagine Black women's (re)productivity. In both *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, these Black women make split-second decisions in their personal and professional lives. In considering the ways these images and the narratives embedded within them function to contain/normalize Black women's structural suffering, I read both Olivia and Annalise and moments to re-imagine Black women's (re)productivity as they make choices regarding how to live their lives on their own terms, afterall, they are boss ladies. Olivia Pope's "its handled" slogan read with Annalise's legal prowess generate moments to re-imagine Black women's mothering through Olivia and

Annalise's (re)productivity. However, in order to do that requires a more nuanced consideration of the ways sexual violence works against Black women.

CHAPTER FIVE: “STILL I RISE”

It is a problem when caretaking (taking care) becomes something we do for other people and not ourselves. It is up to us to survive and not just survive but thrive in our lives.¹⁴⁰

Historically, Black women’s resilience has been integral in navigating the violence inherited within the structure of anti-blackness. Contrary to normative characterizations of Black women as lazy and irresponsible, passively content in their suffering, Black women have built their lives on and around fighting back. In the context of their racial rape and exploitation of their labor, Black women embrace a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices as means through which they develop religions of self-care. These self-care practices are created by Black women to attend to their physical, mental/psychic, and spiritual well-being. For Black mothers, forced to mother themselves and others from within the context of gratuitous violence, strategies of self-care become vital to Black women preserving and protecting their (re)production. Chapter Five examines Black women’s mothering and (re)production through a consideration of their self-care practices as spiritual strategies for self-preservation; more specifically, I interrogate the anti-black contexts that Black women constitute religions of self-care to navigate the everydayness in intimate state violence. The themes I undertake in this chapter revolve around Black women’s spirituality and time & place concerning their mothering & (re)productive labor in state sponsored gratuitous violence. These themes, read through an Afrafuturist feminist frame,

¹⁴⁰Crunk Feminist Collective. “How to Not Die: Some Survival Tips for Black Women Who Are Asked to Do Too Much,” Crunk Feminist Collective (blog), June 2013, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/06/07/how-to-not-die-some-survival-tips-for-black-women-who-are-asked-to-do-too-much/>.

provide nuanced interrogations into Black women's everyday negotiations with intimate state violence as they attempt to specifically mother self. By intimate state violence, building on Joy James (2013) use of the term, I consider the anti-black capitalist relations that exploit and criminalize Black women's attempts to protect their (re)productive futures.¹⁴¹ Spirituality is important to Black women's mothering in context of intimate state violence because it is the means by which Black women support and empower themselves from within themselves. The narratives of racial difference embedded within cultural pathology criminalizing Black women's attempts to "produce properly" has meant that they have had to find creative ways to mother themselves. The anti-black heteropatriarchal law that governs time and place, operating with the preconceived notion that Black women are unable to "produce properly," is the terrain that Black women need religions of self-care. Religions of self-care are the means through which Black women are able to empower themselves through the never-ending, everyday struggles for (re)productive life. Instead of Black women continuously seeking council from the anti-black capitalist state that disenfranchises and (dis)possesses them, Black women's historical use of spirituality demonstrates one of the ways that they thrive in social death.

In this chapter, focusing specifically on Black women's mothering, I analyze Black women's discourses to re-imagine the complexity of their (re)production in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world. In other words, what kinds of theories do Black women's narratives and stories concerning their spirituality, sexuality, and/or (re)production yield in rethinking the complexity of their mothering in anti-blackness? I argue that Black women's texts/products prompt opportunities to theorize Black mothering, and their (re)production as disrupting the anti-black time and place that conditions their structural (dis)possession. I examine Black women's implementation of religions of self-care as actively challenging the time and place of their

¹⁴¹Joy James, "Afrarealism and the Black Matrix." *The Black Scholar*, 43 (2013). 124-131.

subjection by producing their own space to empower themselves. It is Black women's discourses that generate moments to rethink and re-imagine rival rhetorics of Black maternity centered on concern for self, not other. Black women who choose to take care of themselves in light of and/or despite all other assumed/perceived responsibilities are socially and culturally shamed as selfish. In direct opposition to narratives of racial solidarity and compulsory heteronormativity, I analyze Black women's discourses reimagining how they center concern for self in the violent chaos of their everyday. The ways that Black women fashion their own ideas of family, community, and culture in relation to themselves vary and oftentimes perpetuate the culture of violence imposed on Black women. This is why I set out to examine the complex contradictions that shape Black women's mothering in particular ways. The strategies they create to spiritually sustain them in intimate state violence offers a textured vantage point from which to consider why Black women choose to mother the ways they do. That is, instead of engaging in circular debate concerning the respectability of one's mothering categorized as either "good" or "bad."¹⁴² As I have argued, for Black women, both "good" and "bad" black mothers contribute to same cultural pathology that criminalizes their mothering and (re)production. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the ways that Black women cultivate lives for themselves via strategies that may help and hurt them.

Religions of Self-Care

Black women's spirituality is essential in a time and place that warrants their continued subjection. I reread Black women's discourses as imagining the death of capitalist relations criminalizing their mothering and (re)productive lives. Through BMF, with the assistance of Afrafuturist feminist theory, I argue that Black women's cultivation of religions of self-care

¹⁴²See for more on respectability politics: E.Frances White. *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

disrupt time and place enabling a reimagining of their own space and means to empower themselves in intimate state violence.¹⁴³ Building on Alexis Gumbs essay regarding Black queer mothers and literary movements, I read Black women's mothering as criminal to consider the ways Black women's rhetorical practices aim to transform their everyday scene of subjection into sites of (im)possibilities.¹⁴⁴ It is through Black women's creation of strategies for self-preservation that I argue it is possible to imagine the (im)possibilities of theorizing Black mothering and maternity as criminal acts queer(ing) the time and place of their subjection.

Black women's experiences, historically, have necessitated spiritual beliefs and practices to navigate intimate state violence. By intimate state violence, I refer to the exploitation of Black women's economic and reproductive labor, endorsed by the anti-black capitalist state, that impacts their (re)productive lives. For Black women, spirituality is an important context/dimension/element/area to consider in interrogating their intimate and public lives as they mother self. Black women's capacity to (re)produce in never-ending gratuitous violence is productive of what I refer to here as *spiritual elsewhere(s)*. Spiritual elsewhere(s) generated through Black women's belief in worlds/spaces/times beyond their (dis)possession in which they can imagine their true power. The dreams dreamt by Black women such as Simba, Assata Shakur's Black Panther Party comrade, who believe that Black children were "our hope" for the future. Black mothers' particular hopes and aspirations for the future shape the means in which they mother themselves through never-ending violence. The dreams that Black mothers have for their children like Barbara Smith who speaks about her mother and how her education served as

¹⁴³Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris. "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013). 721-737; Durham, Cooper, & Morris note, "Furthermore, the increased presence of stories that imagine new worlds where the experiences of women of color are centered could be seen as a type of Afro-futurism, especially as this imaginative work converges with digital technologies" (733).

¹⁴⁴Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves": A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the "Present", *Gender Forum* 22 (2008), www.org/issues/black-womens-writing-revisited/we-can-learn-to-mother-ourselves.

the blueprint of who she and her twin sister are meant to be despite living in systemized suffering. Smith states, “So our mother was highly educated for a black woman of her time, even though she was not able to use that professionally which was, as I said, typical of African-American women in relationship to racism and employment during most of the years we’ve been in this country. She brought that to us. We got started on the absolute right track.”¹⁴⁵ Despite the conditions that lead Barbara Smith’s mother to work at a supermarket with a Bachelor’s degree of Science in Education, Smith always held steadfast to education saying, “education was the bottom line.”¹⁴⁶ It is Barbara Smith’s unquestioned belief that she was destined for greatness despite the contexts that constrain Black women that I read as spiritual practice that mothers her sense of self through education. Smith’s mentioning of her mother and her struggles in the time and place of her life is important because it shapes the ways that Smith comes into mothering herself, using education as key in that process. The power that Smith asserts in her passion for education in lieu of her mother’s personal history resonates with Maya Angelou’s iconic poem, “Still I Rise” as she speaks of rising from the ashes of enslaved ancestors whose dreams and hopes remain linked to her own. Angelou recites, “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise, I rise, I rise.”¹⁴⁷ The historical legacy of Black women’s resilience as spiritual practice serves as foundation on which women like Smith look to older generations of Black women for strategies to navigate an anti-black world. I interpret Smith’s appeals to education as spiritual in that it provides particular space of her choosing in which she renegotiates herself, and her power, elsewhere.

¹⁴⁵Barbara Smith interview, interviewed by Loretta Ross, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, May 7-8, 2003, 5.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Angelou, Maya. “Still I Rise.” *And Still I Rise*. E-book. New York: Random House, 1978. 305.

Black women's belief/faith in these rhetorical elsewhere(s) feeds Black women's spirits/energies, fueling their resilience as it concerns their (re)productive lives. Analyzing Black women's discourses with this assertion in mind, I contend, enables deeper, more nuanced interrogations into the complexity of Black women's mothering in structural violence.

Rhetoric of Spirituality and Mothering Self in Violence

The rhetoric of spirituality offers a unique moment to consider the ways Black women generate a rival *elsewhere* from which to theorize Black women's experiences with intimate state violence. Utilizing Afrafuturist feminist theory, as situated in BMF, I analyze the ways Black women's rhetoric of spirituality enable Black women to act as their own resources of power and resilience. I examine their public discourse to demonstrate the ways they challenge the time and place securing their subjection by creating their worlds. Black women's care for self is spiritual because it is the means in which they provide and protect themselves through intimate state violence. In interrogating Black women's public discourses, I focus specifically on the ways Black women utilize their religions of self-care to produce life for themselves in a world that assumes they are powerless. These religions of self-care do not deflect or stop the gratuitous violence that shapes their everyday lives however the practice of self-care creates space for themselves to thrive in anti-blackness.

The spiritual elsewhere(s) that Black women's texts produce via their religions of self-care generate moments to re-imagine their relationship to gendered blackness, family, and community & culture with a primary focus on self. A Black woman's concern for self, in my view, does not foreclose a consideration of how they mother children, lovers, friends, and comrades. The emphasis I stress upon Black women's religions of self-care is important as I consider the ways Black women's mothering constitutes a concern for self in connection to others. In other words, I am interested in the ways Black women negotiate self, as a form of

mothering, as it interacts with alternative and traditionally heteronormative forms of mothering. The “religion” I emphasize here speaks to the ways that Black women strategize their social lives like social gospel. Black women are powerful beyond measure as they create religions of self-care to cultivate strength, courage, wisdom, love, and resilience necessary to maneuver themselves in intimate state violence. Afrafuturist feminist theory, as utilized by BMF, is essential in analyzing the complexities of Black women’s mothering in intimate state violence because of its emphasis on ways Black women actively (yet perhaps sometimes unknowingly) challenge anti-black heteropatriarchal law. Black women’s discourses disrupt time and place as their rhetorics expose the mythical boundaries of anti-black heteropatriarchal law. Their rhetorics naming the anti-black contexts of their oppression disrupt anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic narratives criminalizing their mothering and (re)production. Time and place are important as Black women refashion it via their critiques, creating their own space and time to identify themselves and the power they possess.

While this section features a discussion of traditional religious practices, my primary concern is with the manner in which Black women make use of religious rhetorical practice to produce a personal and spiritual elsewhere. These elsewhere(s), rival to time and place organized in anti-black heteropatriarchy, are conjured by Black women in different ways for different reasons to mother themselves in structural violence. Studying the ways that Black women develop strategies for self-preservation, as I argue, does not foreclose moments to consider how they negotiate self in relation to family and community. In fact, I argue that Black women’s strategies of self-care offer moments to re-imagine the ways Black women renegotiate and establish their own notions of family, community, and culture that orbits around a concern for self. Religion(s) as self-care is organized around three themes central to theorizing Black

women's (re)productive lives in anti-blackness: believing in a spiritual elsewhere(s), navigating resilience in chaos, and empowering self in intimate state violence. Even in moments when Black women employ biblical teachings that remain complicit with patriarchal religious teachings and practices, there is something particularly queer about the ways Black women *use* such spaces. In theorizing Black women's mothering through spaces criminalizing their (re)production, my intention is not to re-center Black women's suffering in the same anti-black heteropatriarchal, misogynistic time and place that subjects them.

Religion(s) of self-care are important for Black women mothering a rival sense of self because it provides the means in which Black women create worlds of their own in the time and place exploiting and abusing them. In an anti-black world, time and place are thought to be as natural as fruits that bruise haven fallen from their trees. Black women's rhetoric of spirituality as it concerns their religions of self-care provide moments to rethink how their (re)production disturbs the anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic narratives enforcing Black women's (dis)possession through time and place. In the following passage, Gloria Naylor, interviewed by Tomeiko R. Ashford, discusses the particular thematic overtures that connect her literary works such as *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Mama's Day*, *Linden Hills*, and *Bailey's Cafe*. Prompted by Ashford, Naylor discusses why she intentionally focuses on Black women, spirituality, and time and place as it specifically concerns two of her novels, *Bailey's Café* and *Mama Day*. Through Naylor's literary work, she reiterates the importance of spirituality and religions of self-care for Black women in gratuitous sexual violence. I build on Naylor as she offers a way to think of mothering as a concern of self-organized through a belief in a spiritual elsewhere. Naylor states:

Well, I'm a spiritual person. I no longer belong to a formalized religion but I do believe there are powers beyond ours right here on this earth. I believe that, and if you want to call it a God you can. I am from a people in whom spirituality plays a huge part. The black community respects the spiritual. That's why...when our people came to this country, they brought animism with them, what people used to call paganism. They brought their traditional beliefs, their traditional sense of religion. Then they made a coalition between what they brought and what they found here as far as religion.¹⁴⁸

In terms of strategies, I read Naylor as strategizing a concern for self as understood historically through a path forged by Black ancestors brought to America in chains. Black folks ability to negotiate and create in the context of pain, trauma, and suffering is intimately tied to specific times and place. The history of Black people in the United States is the foundation on which Naylor herself says, "I am from a people in whom spirituality plays a huge part." The history that Naylor aligns herself with aids in the queer(ing) of time as it challenges normative narratives depicting Black people, particularly Black women as lazy and unable to "produce properly."

Naylor's comments are important as she mothers spaces prompting moments to examine how she negotiates her social life in social death. Her contribution is important because it reminds us that Black women as she writes in her literary works, remain resilient in finding ways to sustain themselves given the policed boundaries of anti-black heteropatriarchy. They have been disrupting time and place, according to Naylor, in that they "brought animism" and "their traditional beliefs" in order to thrive in the face of never-ending violence and death. The power of resilience that Black women display is not located in the strategies themselves but rather in the spirit behind the attempt to find and protect self. This is not to assume that Black women's

¹⁴⁸Gloria Naylor, "Gloria Naylor on Spirituality: An Interview," interviewed by Tomeiko R. Ashfordp, *Melus* 30, December 2005. 75-76.

religions of care are able to protect them or always enable them to discover renewed sense of self and power; however, Black women's ability to cultivate resources within themselves demonstrates the power they possess. In analyzing Black women's rhetoric of spirituality, I highlight the powers of creativity, truth-telling, and resilience that Black women possess as they navigate themselves in ongoing violence.

Spirituality is a means with which Black women have negotiated their structural (dis)possession and the violence that causes and results from their status in anti-blackness. Naylor's contribution highlights the complex nature of Black people's constant negation of self in relation to time and place that dehumanizes and exploits their labor as a result of global slave trade. Appeals to spirituality equip Black people with powers of creativity and resilience necessary to create life for themselves in time and place always already oppressing them. Naylor's historical reference to her ancestors and their histories of creativity and spiritual resilience is a resource, I assert, she appeals to in order to empower her own sense of self. When Naylor references her enslaved ancestors and that they "made a coalition" amongst themselves concerning their spiritual practices is the foundation in which she stresses the importance of creativity and truth-telling. It is their belief in a spiritual elsewhere that Naylor alludes to as she discusses what enslaved ancestors had to do in order to power themselves through gratuitous violence. In addition, it supports her as she herself navigates the scars of slavery she acknowledges continue to make spirituality an element she focuses on in her novels.

Writing, as I see it, for Naylor, is a means in which she negotiates her own personal relationship to anti-black heteropatriarchy. Her reference to historical legacies of Black people producing their spiritual beliefs reinforces Naylor's belief that Black woman possess power within themselves to thrive in systemized suffering. The historical production of their own

spiritual practices, a negotiation of African and Anglo-Saxon spiritual practices, is a critical space from which the narrative and practice of black mothering developed for Black women. Naylor mothers herself, I argue, as she mothers future generations using literary fiction to renegotiate herself in a world structured through systemized suffering. It is in these spaces that Black women procure spiritual elsewhere(s) that I interrogate their complex renegotiation of self in violent time and place in anti-blackness. Self-care practices, oftentimes temporary in impact and contradictory in nature, are essential in Black women finding ways to mother themselves and all that they (re)produce. It is Black women's ability to believe in "powers beyond ours right here on this earth" that fuels their capacity to dream and create their own worlds, elsewhere.

Belief in Elsewhere

Black women's historical deployment of spirituality signals a belief in powers beyond the patrolled boundaries of an anti-black world order. Their creation of an *elsewhere* is a crucial attempt at a reconfiguration of time and place to (re)produce a vision of a new world order distant from the *presencing* of structural anti-blackness. Through considerations of spirituality both in the traditional religious sense and in a non-conventional, creative sense I seek out the multitude of ways Black women make use of spirituality as a means of (re)production. Black women's belief in elsewhere then is produced within and across Black women's deployment of traditional and non-conventional spiritual ideologies and practices of self-care. A spiritual belief in an elsewhere provides the foundation on which Black women locate/produce energies necessary to live through structural violence. Spiritual ideologies and practices of self-care, as expressed in Black women's public discourse, provide opportunities to examine connections and linkages between their mothering, (re)production and sexual expression. In highlighting these areas of Black women's lives, rhetorical scholars can better attend to the complexities of gendered blackness in structural violence. The *belief* in elsewhere is foundational to Black

women's spiritual/mental/psychic resilience as both a technique of survival, but more importantly as a creative potential from which to reconstruct *their* world order, the creation of the space and time of self-care. Self-care, as I understand it here, speaks to Black women's attempts to preserve self amidst of ongoing structural, state-sponsored violence, elsewhere. Spiritual belief in a world beyond the everyday violence that shapes their lives, within the violence, provides foundation for Black women to live in and through their (dis)possession.

Prompted at an industry function, African American actress Jada Pinkett-Smith reveals how she remains spiritually fed considering the ways the industry denigrates Black women. Smith asserts, "You gotta have a spiritual foundation. You have to access something that's beyond this material world." Smith's recognition that Black women need spiritual foundation that extends beyond their everyday experiences in civil society is important as it demonstrates the need for Black women to create moments/spaces/opportunities to engage in self-care practices. From Pinkett-Smith's short quote is the recognition that Black women negotiate themselves on their own terms in the context of the violence that impacts their everyday. Pinkett-Smith's use of the term "beyond" signals a yearning for an outside of racial structural violence, an elsewhere they can define themselves. As a mother, Pinkett's spiritual foundation rooted in an elsewhere rather than squarely in her role as serving others. Her response reflects a long standing tradition within Black communities by which Black women are encouraged to define themselves and their spiritual/emotional health in the context of their children, their family, and their community. It is not that family and community are unimportant or insignificant in Black women's (re)productive lives, but rather it is important for them to empower themselves. The power in appealing to a world beyond the physical, "material world" offers Black women opportunities to create their own worlds in the time and place of their subjection.

For some Black women, spirituality has meant embracing formal religious institutions and texts like Christianity and the Bible for strength, courage, and guidance. Leaning on God is important whether Black women are physically in pain or negotiating hostile environments structured around/on their subjection. Black women pray out to “God” to nurture them spiritually in perpetual violence. Religious faith and trust in God historically has been a way Black women negotiate their sense of self beyond yet within an anti-black world. Black women’s navigation of their material realities through biblical text and scriptures is important to their (re)productive lives. Heteropatriarchal misogynistic religious institutions perpetuation of gratuitous sexual violence against Black women is exactly why Black women’s spiritual connection to an elsewhere is essential in their ability to mother themselves. In the following quote Maria Stewart Miller appeals to the biblical sense of God in order to call out the irrational, unjust logics that oppress Black people. The time and place that Miller delivers her speech is publicly important in thinking about how her discourse challenges the scene of her subjection through a rhetoric of spirituality. Miller’s contribution is important here because of what it offers in rethinking Black women’s mothering centered around concern for self as it relates to family, community, and culture. While this quote does not speak to Black women’s mothering specifically, the implications of Miller’s words prompt a reflection concerning the complexity of Black mothering in structural violence.

Then why should one worm say to another, ‘Keep you down there, while I sit up yonder; for I am better than thou?’ It is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but the principles formed within the soul. Many will suffer for pleading the cause of the oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs; for I am firmly persuaded,

that the God in whom I trust is able to protect me from the rage and malice of mine enemies, and from them that will rise up against me.¹⁴⁹

Here, we find Miller speaking publicly about the conditions that inequitably oppress Black people. In response to such reactions, Miller articulates a survival politic designed to offer psychological and spiritual support in the face of suffering. She appeals to God as the keeper of her soul not the men/world who seek to oppress Black people. Miller's reference to worms is not a coincidence considering that she appeals to her faith to challenge the social constructed nature conditioning Black women's everyday lives. Highlighting the socially constructed nature of that which governs the earth generates a moment in which Miller utilizes spiritual beliefs to assert her power, elsewhere. Black women like Miller's belief in an elsewhere, what one might refer to as the God space, enables her to subscribe to something beyond the power of the men controlling the world in which she currently lives. The "trust" that Miller has in God fosters a bridge to a spiritual elsewhere in which she proudly welcomes martyrdom despite threat of "rage and malice" from her "enemies." Miller sacrifices herself as a "martyr" because she believes God will protect her soul from her enemies. That is, her spiritual connection to "God," solidifies her resolve in willing to risk bodily injury and death in challenging the confines of her oppression. In other words, the elsewhere that Miller summons through a belief in God's glory is a strategy that I contend protects her through her sacrifice. In placing her trust in God, Miller remains "firmly persuaded" that her commitment to act as a martyr for the cause will protect her through death. Although Miller appeals to formal religious texts, she utilizes these texts in ways that queer traditional heteropatriarchal interpretations empowering her sense of self as martyr. In claiming

¹⁴⁹Maria W Stewart Miller, "Religion and the Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build." Presentation at Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, Boston, MA., 1832.

glory beyond through an elsewhere beyond the earth, I argue, Miller mothers a sense of self despite the fact that her martyrdom may lead to her physical death.

Spirituality, having some sense of spiritual connection beyond yet within the parameters of structural violence, is a strategy/practice of self-care. It is her willingness to endure suffering and even risk death which I read as Miller renegotiating her relationship to blackness through a spiritual belief and trust in God, elsewhere. In exercising her belief in an elsewhere situated in God, not on earth, I read Miller as she asserts, “the color of the skin” is not what produces/determines power one may possess instead arguing that it is the “principles formed within the soul.” Her use of rhetoric of religion challenges the authoritative power on earth as she exercises her belief in elsewhere that she “shall glory” in being a martyr for “oppressed Africa.” In identifying herself as a martyr, I contend that Miller mothers herself through challenging the natural order of things that violently oppresses Black people. Miller’s trust in the glory that protects her as she speaks of martyrdom, in time and place of her subjection, is a strategy that constitutes her religion of self-care. Her use of spirituality as a rhetorical strategy is the means in which Miller renegotiates the power and resilience of self in world that continues to render Black women powerless. Death, then is not what Miller looks to God to protect her from as she explicitly states she will “glory” in her status as a martyr. Her fearlessness in face of death for a cause she is willing to sacrifice her life for is an example of the strategies Black women have employed to mother self in perpetual suffering. Her faith that God will protect her is not a concern for her physical body as much as it is a concern for her soul. In welcoming death as not the end of something but as the continuing of something challenges confines of anti-blackness that employ death as means to maintain Black (women’s) subjection.

In thinking about the way Miller uses her discourse to create spaces, her use of rhetoric as means to disrupt and challenge authority of white global supremacy itself (re)produces. I read her rhetoric as enabling moments to consider how their mothering, through God, nurtures souls and empowers them to create their own worlds. The world that Miller renegotiates is one that challenges the normative idea that the color of one's skin is what "makes the man" instead arguing that it is the principles that constitute one's soul. In aligning herself with power produced beyond the material world, I read Miller as creating another world that does not oppress her because she is a Black woman. In thinking through Miller's contribution, it is the belief in the impossible permanence of her abjection which enables her spiritual belief in an elsewhere. Black mothering, at its core, is reflective of a concern/love/care for herself as it specifically concerns relates to family and communal ties. In this way, the way that Miller mothers herself is intimately connected/tied to the importance of community and network which includes traditional and alternative familial structures.

Anti-black heteronormative conceptions of family and community are disrupted and renegotiated as Miller celebrates herself as a martyr. She refashions ideas about community and culture in connection to self as she states that it is not about the "color of the skin" but rather "the principles formed within the soul." It is not just Miller's soul on the line as she speaks about "the cause of oppressed Africa" which communicates a concern for community and culture through a concern for herself. The importance of what is within a person's soul provides a moment to consider how Black women act as resources for themselves, their families, and their communities in navigating themselves through intimate state violence. It is not Miller's relationship with God that works to disrupt time and place of her subjection. Rather, I read Miller as challenging anti-black time and place as she refuses to allow the color of her skin to determine

the content of her character and soul. Miller has created her own rules and her strategies that mother herself and rival ideas of community as culture through her challenge of the lethal boundaries of anti-blackness. Miller's contribution highlights the ways that Black women's concern for self is mothering an alternative idea of family and community in context that uses these ideas to oppress Black women specifically.

With the recognition that intimate state violence, as experienced by Black women, will never end comes the acknowledgment that this leaves an everlasting effect on them and how they believe it best to negotiate the ills of an anti-black world. Althea King's outspoken temperament concerning abortion in Black communities offers a moment in which to consider the implications of utilizing religion in ways that promote violence against other Black women. Outraged at the rate in which Black women are reportedly getting abortions, especially with Planned Parenthood as providers, King's use of biblical texts and teachings to inform her cultural and historical opposition to abortion offers moment to consider how King's spiritual elsewhere is implicated in violence against Black women through religion. King says:

Tell them abortion is bad for children; it's destroying families. By taking the lives of our young, and wounding the wombs and lives of their mothers, we are flying in the face of God. We cannot play God. If we continue down this path of destruction, we will be met at the gates by our own doom. This is the day to choose life. We must live and allow our babies to live. We must end the pain of post-abortion trauma. If the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is to live, our babies must live. Our mothers must choose life. If we

refuse to answer the cry of mercy from the unborn, and ignore the suffering of the mothers, then we are signing our own death warrants.¹⁵⁰

King's contribution, while attempting to cultivate a racially conscious movement concerning Black reproduction and Black community, provides a moment to think through the potential violent consequences of a belief in a spiritual elsewhere. In the elsewhere King cultivates, she utilizes religious texts in the context of historical and cultural narratives within Black communities to assert that Black women seeking/receiving abortions voluntarily are "flying in the face of God." Taking her assertion one step further, King insists that Black women must not "play God" or else they run the risk of continuing on a "path of destruction" created by their own irresponsible doing. In arguing that Black abortion is a means in which the U.S. government is secretly working to kill African Americans, King employs a rhetoric of spirituality that shames Black women for making decisions concerning their (re)production. The particular historical and cultural narratives King plays on is legitimate in that Black communities have been dealing with intimate state violence such as forced sterilization. However, the ways that King uses her spiritual belief in God to insinuate Black women are to blame for the doom they create in their own lives. The only way Black women can redeem themselves in the eyes of their families and communities is by mothers "choosing life" and allowing [Black] babies to live. In other words, it is only when Black women abstain from abortion that they can fulfil their purpose in uplifting the Black community.

Confident, with God on her side, that she has the "proper" moral/ethical compass, King's rhetoric aims to move Black women. Move them, that is, in a particular direction, her direction.

¹⁵⁰Alveda King, "How Can Blacks Survive If We Murder Our Children," *LifeNews.com*. February 18, 2013. www.lifenews.com/2013/02/18/alveda-king-how-can-blacks-survive-if-we-mother-our-children (accessed December 16, 2915).

A direction, that I contend, reproduces the very problematic ideological narratives that she claims to empower women against. Her rationale of course is that Black women can empower themselves by embracing and welcoming motherhood considering the historical exploitation of their sexual reproduction as Black females. In the elsewhere King's rhetoric cultivates, she employs traditional religious doctrine and cultural narratives in Black communities to compose a specific argument against abortion by Black women. The entire focus of her message is on the Black women seeking and receiving abortions, not on the structural conditions impacting Black women's personal decision to abort. For King, Black women who willingly seek and receive abortions are not just killing their babies, they are in essence killing themselves as well. The ties between mothering self and mothering space for family and community are evident as King discusses actions of Black women regarding abortion as a community issue. However, in centering Black women's heteronormative responsibility for mothering children, King uses her spirituality to deny Black women the sense of self needed to make the difficult decision to abort. Moreover, her emphasis on Black women fulfilling their duties to Black communities is the means in which she shames Black women as her abortion signs all Black people's death warrants. This is, due to King's belief that Black women are committing racial suicide and aiding the state in Black genocide.

Instead of utilizing her spiritual beliefs to critique the structural conditions that have historically violated Black women's mothering, she uses Christianity to discipline Black women. The spiritual elsewhere that she conjures through her appeal to religion disciplines Black women and continues to deny them bodily autonomy in light of historical and cultural narratives she uses. More so, the logics embedded in King's heteropatriarchal, misogynistic rhetoric concerning Black women and abortion remain complicit in the time and place that criminalizes Black

women's mothering and (re)production. In speaking about the doom and destruction that Black women bring upon their families and communities, King's discourse continues to blame Black women for the assumed decline/destruction of the Black heteronormative family. Her use of religious texts mixed with particular cultural and historical narratives, through belief in elsewhere, have painfully violent consequences for all Black women. In her rhetoric, King does not denounce the logics informing normative sexual politics that characterize Black women as lazy, irresponsible, and unable to "produce properly." King's rhetoric of spirituality endorses anti-black heteropatriarchal constraints imposed on Black women's mothering and (re)production as Black women's protection is conditioned on their compliance. Black women must comply to be mothers in the heteronormative sense, foreclosing opportunities to consider mothering in relation to one's self, in order to receive protection and validation from the Black community. Miller's rhetoric of spirituality functions differently than King's rhetoric of spirituality in that King only challenges anti-black heteropatriarchy through a concern for community over self. Rhetorics like King's are particularly dangerous. They are dangerous considering the apocalyptic discourses she employs because it continues a tradition that always already views Black women as unable to "produce properly" and thus powerless.

In speaking about Black peoples' fears historically concerning intimate state violence and abuse like forced sterilization, King uses Christianity to shame and discipline Black women. Her assertion that Black women who choose to abort are "flying in the face of God" and thus "playing God" works to continue to blame Black women for the current state of black communities. Moreover, King's rhetoric insinuating that Black women who choose abortion "are signing our own death warrants" works in line with anti-black heteropatriarchal logics that criminalize Black women for mothering themselves. In this case, the elsewhere that King's

rhetoric calls into existence publicly espoused to be concerned with uplifting the Black community works by shaming Black women into compliance. Appeals to histories of eugenics, population control and coercive sterilization through traditional appeals to family and community operate by de-centering a concern for Black women themselves. King's call for Black women to live selflessly for their babies, families and communities denies opportunities to consider the well-being of Black women. I find this to be particularly the case as Black women's home and intimate lives are sources/sites that inflict violence on them under the guise of family and community. Her focus on the "path of destruction" Black women create for themselves as they participate in an industry believed to be secretly plotting to eradicate African American populations fails to acknowledge the complexity Black women negotiate in making decisions concerning their (re)productive lives. The elsewhere that King produces has violent implications for other Black women as her anti-black heteropatriarchal use of religion remain complicit in logics that constrain Black women's mothering. In this case, King, while she may hope to uplift Black women, become an additional source of gratuitous violence Black women have to negotiate in order to mother self and new ideas of family, community, and culture that do not necessitate their subjection. The apocalyptic rhetoric she uses in disciplining Black women is particularly dangerous because a concern for Black women and their lives only comes in they accept their role in community which is essentially reduced to making babies. It is not King's belief in an elsewhere through Christianity that n of itself inflict violence on Black women rather it is how she makes use of her beliefs that perpetuates the culture of shame around Black women's (re)production. Important from King's contribution is the recognition that the production of elsewhere does not eliminate or eradicate systemized suffering that Black women endure in intimate state violence. In other words, the elsewhere(s) that Black women cultivate

via their religions of self-care are not neat utopias where gratuitous sexual violence no longer impacts their everyday lives. The complexity of Black women's mothering evidenced in the messiness that King's contribution highlights when read against Miller's religion of self-care that imagines self and community as centered on concern for souls, not particular acts/actions. While I argue that the histories surrounding Black women's (re)production have imposed labor upon them, Black women have historically found ways to retain power over their lives. King, however, suggests otherwise.

What can we make of these seemingly conflicting views that publicly espouse importance of Black mothering yet deny Black women ability to mother themselves without shame? The paradox that Black women are forced to live in call attention to the types of contexts they must negotiate in order to find social life in social death. In this analysis, these conflicting views demonstrate the range/depth to which gratuitous violence impacts Black women. In addition, it demonstrates the complexity of Black women's everyday lived experience. King's entire campaign is based upon her experience of involuntarily sterilization at the hands of state and medical institutions. Her background story is by no means rare, reflecting the ongoing nature of Black women's structural (dis)possession. King's experiences partially shape her public discourse on Black mothering. My intention here is not to in-turn shame King for her ideological beliefs as they are a direct reflection of Black women's complex and traumatic experiences within anti-blackness concerning their (re)productive labor. However, the implications of her choices on Black women have devastating, violent consequences for other Black women.

Across Pinkett-Smith's, Miller's and King's discourses we identify contexts that necessitate or demand spiritual belief in an elsewhere. However, the productions of these elsewhere(s), as indicated from King's contribution, is messy. In its messiness, is power that

Black women cultivate within themselves in order to navigate public spaces to discuss their (re)productive lives; that is, their intimate and public lives are always already bound together informing/maintaining their (dis)possession. For instance, King's utilization of patriarchal, misogynistic abortion rhetoric intending to "empower" Black mothers is a strategy she uses to actively interrupt the exploitation of Black communities. Although, in my view, she fails to accomplish her objective as her discourse is rhetorically loaded and invested in their suffering, it is nonetheless a strategy. Recognizing the ways Black women cultivate practices of self-care is important as we can see the impact that it can have on other Black women; practices of self-care, especially those expressed through/in spiritual means, are always connected to other Black women's fate/lives.

While religious interpretations of spiritual faith are an important part to Black women's (re)productive lives, formal religious institutions and places for worship dedicated to the gospel often leave Black women open to exploitation and misuse. Dynamics of normative gender politics within gendered blackness breed sexual violence and trauma as experienced by Black women. In these moments of violence, always connected to the gendered and sexual degradation of Black women structurally, Black women still choose to fight against their structural positioning. Moreover, we see Black women actively attempting to negotiate their (re)productive life even in the context of their abuse. The complexity of Black women's mothering is highlighted as they struggle to create and establish practices of self-care to nurture themselves mentally, emotionally, and physically. In thinking through the importance of self-care strategies as it relates to Black women's mothering, it is critical to think about how these practices may also engender violence against them. Black women's mothering, for me, in this way, is complex because the strategies are created to aid Black women however they do not always help Black

women in ways they may anticipate or hope. Nonetheless, it is the fact that Black women attempt to find ways to thrive in anti-blackness that is powerful. It is powerful because it is the power that Black women produce within themselves, sustained through religions of self-care that mothers their negotiation of self as it relates to family, community, and culture. The following section demonstrates Black women's resilient efforts, engaging in practices of self-care, particularly as it relates to spirituality, in all its messy complexity.

Navigating Chaos in Elsewhere

In this section, I interrogate Black women's (re)production in the spiritual elsewhere(s) their labor generates to consider the complexity of Black women's mothering. Black women's religions of self-care while cultivated to feed them physically, emotionally, and mentally, may also create situations that exhaust them emotionally and abuse them mentally and sexually. These spiritual elsewhere are not spaces that are free of the gratuitous violence that is a tool of anti-blackness. Rather it is Black women's creative imagination, guided by a set of spiritual codes/beliefs/practices, that feeds their spirituality which grounds their (re)productive efforts. Black women's establishment of practices and strategies to preserve herself first and foremost is one way in which Black women imagine the God in themselves. In doing so, Black women recognize the power and authority they have concerning their bodies and their (re)productive lives.

How do Black women mother themselves through these violent yet reoccurring moments of sexual predation? I contend that Black women's discourse, which I examine below, generate opportunities to consider how these negotiations are invented or (re)produced and what they produce. More specifically, I speculate upon the means by which Black women's discourse acts rhetorically across time and space to produce rival spaces to analyze Black women's (re)productive lives, and their mothering practices specifically. In other words, how do their

rhetoric(s) engage the violence they experience and endure in the name of and under God present rival moments to re-imagine Black women's (re)productivity? Imagining it, through what Black women themselves produce, creates spaces to consider the complexity of their mothering in the context of structural violence.

In 2013, viewers were introduced to a love triangle between Peter Gunz, Tara Wallace, & Amina Buddafly. In an unexpected turn of events, Peter marries Amina despite being in a relationship with Tara for over ten years resulting in two children. The fallout between Peter and Tara continues to play a role in his relationship with his wife as he continues to flander back and forth between the two women. The fact is, Peter continues his patterned behavior day after day, knowing full the effect it has on both Black women he claims to love. In the wake of learning that Peter was unfaithful once again, this time impregnating his former girlfriend of ten years, Tara Wallace, Amina declares she no longer wants to be married to Peter. The pattern of his behavior and the violence it incites on Tara and Amina are a reflection of the white paternalistic, misogynistic ideologies that praise men for being sexually promiscuous while simultaneously shaming Black women for the indiscretions of their romantic partners. In the following scene, Amina speaks candidly about her relationship with her husband Peter Gunz and everything she has been through with him including her unplanned pregnancy and her decision to terminate the pregnancy. Her decision to leave her husband in light of his latest infidelity resulting in pregnancy considering that Amina had just recently terminated her own pregnancy leads her to find her inner strength. In discussing her emotional relationship with Peter, Amina's words touch on the importance of self-care in moments of violence especially emotionally and mentally. Reflecting on her relationship and her future happiness, she laments:

This year, I lost a baby, I lost a husband, and at times I feel like I lost myself. But what I did find is my voice, my strength, and the ability to stand confidently on my own two feet. To demand better for myself and my daughter. I am living my life for me now and no matter what the future may hold, I know in my heart that I will be okay.¹⁵¹

As part of a well-followed reality television show, Amina's decision to have an abortion and her complicated relationship have been well publicized and circulated since her appearance on the show back in 2013. Amina's personal logic behind her decision to have an abortion, understanding it would be broadcast live for the world to view, demonstrates the complexity of her life in anti-blackness. Her comments regarding her abortion considering the state of her relationship with her unfaithful husband is a moment to examine the complexity of Black women's lives as they negotiate their mothering around their intimate and public lives. A recurring theme in public and popular discourse is that it is Black women's fault that their men cheat on them and abuse them, that they are "stupid" enough to keep "falling for it." What may seem cut and dry from the outside is actually far more complex than we generally understand.

The point here is not to make sense of Amina and Tara's actions as much as it is to interrogate the ways that their experiences, individually and collectively, reflect a structural violation/exploitation of Black women's (re)production. It is but one example of the ways that Black women are shaped by and through the violence, which I understand here as including mental and emotional abuse/manipulation, they are forced to navigate. Earlier in the season Amina speaks about her abortion saying, "Despite everything that Peter has put me through, I love him but I know that loving him is hurting me."¹⁵² Amina goes on to say, "It's just a messed

¹⁵¹Love and Hip Hop: New York. "Love Conquers All." 12. *VH1*. March 7, 2016.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*

up situation and I can't do this right now. I need to think smart for once because I always think with my heart. I woke up and I knew I had to do this for me."¹⁵³

Her decision to abort her child for herself considering she just found out her husband was cheating on her with his ex-girlfriend (whom he dated at one point for 10 years prior to/during his relationship with Amina) is a strategy of self-care. In doing so, her interview regarding her abortion contributes to the cultivation of (re)productive theory produced through Black women's discourse and practices of self-preservation. It contributes to theories Black women produce as Amina asserts power over her own life and her happiness as opposed to looking to Peter to validate her in any way. Her contribution reiterates the idea that Black women who mother themselves are simultaneously mothering their children as Amina's happiness, or lack thereof, directly impacts her daughter and the strategies she adopts to mother herself. Key here is the emphasis of Black women's focus on themselves and what is best for them even in the midst of making unhealthy choices in their intimate and public lives. Amina's decision to "live my life for me" is in context that she describes in relation to losing her baby, her husband, and herself. Even Tara, two episodes previous to Amina's revelation, says, "I will always love Peter but I love myself and my children more than to be in this one-sided destructive relationship."¹⁵⁴ Like Amina, Tara makes a decision in aftermath of years of back and forth with Peter, to live for herself instead of for an unfaithful man. The power of both Amina and Tara's revelations is not only that they are choosing to focus on themselves and their kids but rather that they believe in the power they possess to "be okay" without Peter.

The fact that both these women choose to take a risk and "stand on their own two feet" is indicative of the power these women produce within themselves. Their belief that they deserve

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

more for themselves and their children, I argue, is possible through their belief in themselves. In this case, it is not God that these Black mothers center in their renegotiation of self but rather themselves directly. It is in the chaos that Amina produces the resilience within herself to leave, even if only temporarily, that highlights the importance of Black women caring first and foremost for themselves. In speaking about how she always focuses on others and their happiness, her decision to instead “demand better” for herself by leaving an emotionally abusive relationship is spiritual. Finding her own “voice,” “strength,” and “the ability to confidently stand” on her own, I argue Amina’s contribution is a spiritual move to care for self, equipping her with the resilience. Her belief in an elsewhere demonstrated as she states that regardless of what her future holds that “she will be okay.” It is her belief that she will be okay that produces space for Amina to assert her newfound voice and strength that she says at time she felt she lost.

Amina speaking publicly about what she has found within herself is possible through her belief that she will be okay. The belief that she will be okay is important as it produces the space for her to re-imagine herself as strong and confident in herself for herself and her child, not for a man. Her story is an example of the ways Black women have to negotiate a sense of self via practices/beliefs that strengthen them spiritually, mentally, and physically through the messiness of their intimate and public lives. The messiness comes from the fact that the way Tara mothers herself and her pain, as part of the Tara-Peter-Amina live triangle, is to go back and forth on her decision to leave Peter alone. During certain moments in the show Tara makes it clear that she wants nothing to do with Peter. Part of Tara’s emotional suffering comes with the knowledge that Peter married the woman (Amina) he had cheated with, information revealed during the filming of the series. The emotional and mental abuse Tara suffers from Peter’s lies and infidelities to her over the years, far before Amina, impacts/shapes/affects her (re)productivity.

Thus, Amina's intimate and public lives overlap in complex, complicated ways exacerbated by structural violence all of which impact her mothering; more specifically, in this example, it also shapes the ways that the public speaks about Amina's womanhood and her mothering. The backlash against Amina's refusal to immediately leave her philandering husband does little to acknowledge the complexity of situations like these in which intimate violence coalesces at the intersection of a gendered and sexualized anti-blackness.

Newfound reality star, Cardi B, has taken social media and popular culture by storm over the last few years due to her openness, rawness, and honesty regarding her personal life and life experiences. First gaining notoriety from Instagram videos where Cardi B openly and honestly tackles a wide-range of topics including stripping and making "schmoney" to politics and her personal regrets, no holds barred. Now, casted on Love to VH1's Love & Hip-Hop NY reality show, Cardi's "tell it like it is" approach paired with her determination and ambition to be successful despite obstacles make her story-telling a moment to examine truth-telling as power. In the following interview, while she discusses the harsh realities she faced dealing with insecurities concerning her body, Cardi B talks about how stripping saved her life. Unafraid to be herself and tell you to "fuck off" in the same breath, Cardi B sits down and discusses her personal journey to the present. In speaking about her life, she talks specifically about stripping as an escape abuse from an ex-boyfriend on who she was financially dependent. Her discussion of stripping as a means for her financial independence from an abusive relationship, for me, reiterates the necessity that Black women develop strategies to spiritually and mentally create and sustain a sense of self and worth in the chaos of their subjection. Her reflections are important in thinking about necessity of religions of self-care for Black women spiritually and materially as they attempt to create lives for themselves in chaos.

I was poor as hell, living with my ex-boyfriend that was beating my ass. I had to drop outta' school, I was living with his mama [and] two pit bulls in a bedroom. It was crazy...How was I gonna' leave when I only make \$200 every week. Ain't no way...It [stripping] really did though, they make it so negative, but like it really saved me from a lot of things.¹⁵⁵

What is interesting about Cardi B is the way she chooses to navigate herself not just in relation to her newfound fame but how she negotiates herself in her every-day. In one minute and twenty-two seconds, Cardi B proclaims her love for her hood, the South Bronx, and her appreciation to the strip club for teaching her life lessons and giving her confidence to handle herself. In this way, I focus on Cardi B's discussion of her introduction into stripping as a moment to theorize the complexity of Black women's mothering of self in violent chaos.

The stories Cardi B shares about her life and her experiences in chaos demonstrate her resilience as she refuses to accept the conditions constraining her life. I read Cardi B's contribution as exhibiting resilience as she realistically admits that there "ain't no way" she could leave that situation unless she was able to financially provide for herself. Leaving home at a young age into a relationship that had Cardi B financially dependent on an abusive man, stripping, as she describes, "saved her from a lot of things." Stripping, while regarded as something "negative," equipped Cardi B with ability to take care of herself instead of being forced to rely on an abusive partner. Her story is important in thinking about the complexity of Black women's mothering of self precisely because of the respectability politics that praise and shame Cardi B simultaneously. Cardi B can be praised as she describes her attempts to leave an abusive situation however she is shamed because of the particular route she chose. Unashamed

¹⁵⁵Cardi B interview, interviewed by DJ VIAD, *VLAD TV*, January 17 2016.

of her choices and the means by which she has been able to support herself, Cardi B celebrates who she understands herself to be through sharing intimate stories about her struggles.

The politics of respectability tied to time and place in anti-blackness are disrupted by Black women like Cardi B who publicly celebrate what Black women are assumed and stigmatized to represent. Frequently, Cardi B says “the hood raised me” and “the hood made” me which I read as challenging time and place. In claiming the time and place used to shame Cardi B for being ratchet and unable to “speak properly,” despite her intellectual interest in history and political science, she disrupts the scene of her subjection using it to create her own connections to spaces she frequents in her every-day. Her love for the South Bronx and her public expression of appreciation and humility of where she grew up is important in thinking about how Cardi mothers space for herself, and others. Cardi B’s public celebration of the place she grew up, in context of her subjection in this time and place, highlights how her truth-telling challenges the boundaries of anti-blackness. More specifically, I read Cardi B as renegotiating her own relationship to blackness in time and place in spaces that she creates via her strategies of self-care. Part of what makes Cardi B’s stories about initial introduction to stripping is that she is so open and honest about how it has impacted her life in positive and negative ways. When asked by the interview if she would encourage women to strip she says no because of the potential insecurities it can cause.¹⁵⁶ I read Cardi B’s as mothering space for others as she mothers herself through her stories and life lessons. Here, the power of truth-telling about her life and stripping

¹⁵⁶Cardi B interview, interviewed by The Breakfast Club, Breakfast Club Power 105.1 Radio, March 8, 2016.; To the women who feel like stripping is what they want or need to make money, she says, “Work and save. Even when I was stripping, I was saving...if [stripping] is what you gotta do to get your money then do it but don’t get lost in the game, don’t get lost in the sauce...save ya’ money and leave. Save it and leave and have a time limit.” Cardi B is not ashamed of her past nor does she attempt to shame women from becoming strippers, rather her comments offer useful tips considering her experience and struggles as a stripper. Regardless of the fame and money Cardi B earns, she is proud of her past and remains rooted/connected to it as source of her self-determined power.

past despite criticisms regarding her choices is spiritual as it allows Cardi B to sustain sense of self in chaos.

Naylor reminds us, those Black women “who controlled their bodies controlled their destiny” so Cardi B’s discussion of her stripping as means of self-care is important as she refuses others to control her.¹⁵⁷ In this way, her mention of stripping is discussed as the way that she mothered herself through an abusive relationship and other personal struggles she dealt with growing up in the South Bronx. In recognizing the ways that Black women are vulnerable to intimate partner violence like Cardi B share their stories which I contend becomes a means through which they empower themselves. Cardi’s story is a resilient one because she uses resources within herself to maneuver herself out of a chaotic situation. She mothers herself not just in that she decides to strip but as she attempts to procure a better, more financially independent life for herself. In highlighting the strategies that Black women create for themselves to navigate the particularities of their situations, I also stress the importance of the process by which Black women attempt to find ways to thrive in chaos. This reiterates my assertion earlier regarding the chaos within elsewhere. That is, the lives that Black women create for themselves, while productive and up-lifting in some ways can be understood as destructive; not just to self but to those around them and Black women more generally. It does not mean the strategies Black women cultivate are effective in achieving what they may hope however it is the attempt to dream and wish for something in a world that gives Black women every reason to stop dreaming.

¹⁵⁷Gloria Naylor interview, interviewed by Angels Carabí, *Universidad de Barcelona*, 1991, 31. Print.

The Power of Spirituality & Black Mothering

Black feminist, activist, and visionary Barbara Smith attends to the violence produced through production of religious forms of spirituality as it impacts Black queer folks. Smith contends:

One of the major barriers for lesbians and gay men was, and remains, black religious institutions. Traditionally an inspirational and organizing tool in the Black community, the church has almost always taken a stand against homosexuality. This condemnation naturally causes great pain among the large numbers of Black lesbians and gay men who want to maintain religious ties, which are also ties to family, culture, and home.¹⁵⁸

In this moment, Smith creates space for herself, as understood in line with Black women's legacy of resilience, to highlight the relations of force that impose violence on Black queer bodies. Considering the importance of spirituality to Black folks historically, the recognition that these spaces are in part cause of ongoing violence continues to reveal/reiterate the chaos that an attempt to develop an elsewhere can produce for Black women. Her quote resonates because it demonstrates the ways that Black women mother space through mothering self. From Smith's quote, I imagine a moment to consider the complexity of Black women's mothering. I argue that Smith's contribution here actively demonstrates how Black women mother self and space in perpetual, ongoing violence. In the context of the "great pain" Smith describes, is her recognition that Black queer folks still desire to maintain religious ties is an instance in which the space she has created for herself works to potentially nurture others. In doing so, I read Smith as refashioning constraining concepts of religion, spirituality, and community as it pertains to self. Her renegotiation of these concepts does not mean that these concepts are not still used to justify their subjection. It is Black women like Smith who call attention to the ways that these tools are

¹⁵⁸Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Hurts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985).

still useful to Black queer folks that mothers space for rival notions of family and community prompted by a primary concern for herself.

Black women, like Smith, creating their own space elsewhere in anti-black time and place are mothering strategies. They are mothering strategies that I contend simultaneously serve a communal function. I reread her critique against traditional Black religious institutions and the pain they cause Black lesbians and gay Black men, connected to issues of mothering. Her contributions here important to a consideration of Black women's mothering as Smith's rhetoric demonstrates the ways Black women negotiate themselves between place and space.¹⁵⁹ Her discussion of the "great pain" these institutions cause does not negate the fact that these institutions and practice of religious faith provide Black women with "inspirational and organizing tool[s]" to mother self through violence. The tools that Smith speaks of are important as religious faith has been historically important in Black peoples' lives within systemized suffering. These tools are important for Black women specifically as they can be utilized to inspire and empower Black women. Smith draws attention to anti-black contexts that Black women are forced to mother themselves through. Critique then, for Black women mothering in anti-blackness, should be interpreted here as a spiritual practice, a practice of self-care that mothers self in time and place that have "always taken a stand against homosexuality." Her discussion of the anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic logics that cause this great pain for Black queer folks is important because as she says lesbians and gay men "want to maintain religious ties." It is these spaces that I read Smith's contribution as producing that I consider the complexity of Black women's lives in anti-blackness. The ways that Black women mother themselves as they publicly speak out against the confines of their subjection generate

¹⁵⁹Place and space here, refer to the spaces Black women's public discourses mothers elsewhere, disrupting anti-black heteropatriarchal laws organized through time and place that always already securing their subjection.

opportunities for Black queer and trans women particularly to re-imagine their lives and spiritual selves despite ongoing exclusion. It is the ways they cultivate space for themselves in times and places refusing to include them that I read Black women's rhetorics as disrupting anti-black time and place.¹⁶⁰ In Black women finding ways to mother themselves and develop their own sense of self, they are best able to mother rival notions of family, community, and culture. Smith challenges the time and place of her subjection, using rhetoric as means to exercise her God-in-self.

The vilification of Black queer folks in black communities and larger world is inextricably linked to the gratuitous structural violence that shapes Black women's (re)productivity. The anti-black heteropatriarchal, misogynistic logics embedded within a majority of black religious institutions regarding same-sex relationships and Black trans persons are the same logics that exploit Black women's (re)production. The logics justifying the exclusion of Black queer folks in traditional institutions are the same logics that criminalize all Black women's ability to produce "properly." In other words, the exclusion of Black queer folks from these places, and violently so, contribute to and uphold anti-black narratives characterizing Black women's mothering as criminal. What I am trying to suggest here is that the issues that Smith discusses in relation to Black queer folks exclusion from traditional Black religious institutions are always already connected to issues of Black women's mothering and (re)production. Again, examining Black women's discourse like Smith offers moment to examine how these women mother themselves through anti-black heteropatriarchal laws criminalizing their (re)productive labor. Smith's contribution is her focus on Black religious

¹⁶⁰Important here for me is the idea that the disruptions that Black women produce via their (re)production are spiritual. They are spiritual because they nurture rival sense of self enabling Black women to act as powerful resources for themselves through a belief in spiritual elsewhere, a world beyond anti-blackness within the anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic world.

institutions and its desire to extrapolate queerness from blackness allows us to consider how her observations comment/speak to the complexity of Black mothering. That is the normative sexual politics, established through heteronormative politics of respectability informing Black lesbian and gay men's exclusion from space and protection in traditional religious institutions reinforce and uphold all Black women's suffering. For Black women, practices of self-care are vitally important because they feed Black women's souls in intimate state violence.

Gloria Naylor's literary work addressing themes of spirituality, time & place, creativity & resilience, and truth-telling as power as means to consider the power Black women possess within themselves. In speaking about the importance of spirituality and dreaming regarding her Black female characters in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor says, "you see life often tells you 'hey!, this is not for you!', but there is still validity in that fact that you do dream and you do try."¹⁶¹ Power, in this case, being that which Black women cultivate within themselves evident through the religions of care they establish to find social life in social death. The capacity to not only dream but to attempt to find ways to transform dreams into an everyday reality is the God-in-self that Naylor believes we all possess within. All Black women possess power within themselves to preserve self and thrive in face of intimate state violence as the capacity to (re)produce is in our "racial blood." Naylor reiterates the importance of Black women recognizing the power they produce within themselves as part of the legacy Black women have generated as she speaks about that legacy in her racial blood. Racial blood here, in speaking about the legacy of Black women's resilience in gratuitous sexual violence, reinforces her claims that all Black women have the capacity to dream and produce life for themselves despite suffering they endure.

¹⁶¹Gloria Naylor interview, interviewed by Angels Carabí, *Universidad de Barcelona*, 1991, 29. Print.

The historical legacy concerning Black women's resilience in connection with the importance of community and relationship are integral to Black women's religions of self-care. Black women's care for self, while centered on self is never just about one's self. Rather, it is in Black women's ability to care for themselves that their capacities to provide and protect others contributes to her power. Despite the struggles that Black women face, as it concerns their (re)productive lives in anti-blackness, Naylor believes they possess the power to decide "whether or not your dreams die. You really can."¹⁶² The power that Naylor alludes to is possible through the creative and resilient spirits of Black women. The notion of God-in-self she speaks to is important in rethinking Black women's mothering in terms of a concern for self. The God-in-self metaphor is useful in reimagining the ways Black women's mothering of self and space disrupts anti-black heteropatriarchal law. Time and place, through Black women's assertion of the God-in-self they possess create moments in which Black women renegotiate their relationship to themselves. Mothering of self, as I have argued, remains a spiritual practice that assist Black women as they negotiate the constraints imposed on their (re)productive lives. The religions of self-care that Black women create for themselves prompts consideration of the power Black women produce within to remain resilient in the face of constant gratuitous sexual violence. In consideration of Black women's mothering, the religions of self-care I focus on in this chapter are indicative of the God-in-self that Black women assert as they (re)produce strategies for social life. Black women, I argue, in imagining the God within themselves, cultivate practices of self-care. The spiritual power that religions of self-care possess is not in the impact of the strategies themselves but rather in the fact that Black women attempt to thrive in face of never-ending gratuitous violence. I appeal to God-in-self as means to consider the ways Black women re-imagine their mothering through a concern for self in perpetual ravishment. More specifically,

¹⁶²Ibid.

I reflect on the ways the God-in-self metaphor works as a strategy of Black women's mothering in anti-black gratuitous violence.

Imagining God-in-self

In this section, I briefly analyze Black women's creation of their own spiritual code/compass as a practice or strategy of self-care and self-preservation. Several Black women visionaries make mention of the importance of Black women finding the God in themselves. This metaphor, God-in-self generates space to re-imagine Black women acknowledging the power they possess within themselves as means to mother one's self in intimate state violence. Through a spiritual sense of self, Black women pioneer to produce and create in spite of the various ways this world devalues their (re)production. Understanding that God, in the biblical sense, symbolizes the unexplainable power that resides on planes beyond an anti-black world. Reading the significance and power of these women's discourse detailing their spiritual beliefs does not undermine or devalue Black women's employment of or subscription to traditional, biblical texts and teachings. Black women's adaption of biblical texts to create or devise their own spiritual guides offers another moment to examine the reach of violence in Black women's lives. Violence, as I have argued, impacts their lives as mothers; what does it mean then to theorize Black mothering in the context of their own (re)productivity?

In the following passage, Carmarion D. Anderson, co-founder of Black Trans Women International (BTWI) and staff minister in Dallas Texas discourses the importance of mothering in connection God-like power mothers possess within. As a Black trans woman who explicitly identifies as both trans and mother, she delivers a spiritual message to help uplift, affirm, and celebrate mothers. It is her identity as a Black trans mother that I consider in connection to her central message concerning the mothering and the importance of possessing a belief in self

cemented through purpose. Embracing a spirit of fierceness as spiritual mode is evident through discourse such as that offered by Anderson. She asserts:

Mother's Day is not about a physical bond but [rather] it's about the nurturing spirit we all have, not by gender, not by race nor by age...know you are a powerful person because you possess the power of nurturing.¹⁶³

What I appreciate about Carmarion D. Anderson's comments here are in her renegotiation of anti-black heteronormative conceptions of mothering governed by racialized gender normativity as space to celebrate first and foremost herself as a self-identified as both "trans" and "mother" as a Black trans woman. I argue, that Black women's discourse as produced by Anderson in the above excerpt, generates rival spaces to theorize their lives in the context of structural violence. She renegotiates heteronormative, misogynistic narratives constraining mothering in her declaration that Mother's Day is "not about a physical bond." Here, she directly challenges the biological, "natural," assumptive logics that tether mothering to heteronormative conceptions of gender in anti-blackness. Her acknowledgement of the limits of biological characterizations of mothering through "physical bonds," Anderson forwards a different idea to anchor/reiterate the importance of mothering, "nurturing." Important to Anderson's message is the fact that we all have the spirit of nurturing within us and that is important for us to celebrate. Keeping her specific target audience in mind that always already includes Black trans mothers as part of the Mother's Day celebration, Carmarion Anderson's spiritual message (re)produces the death of anti-black capitalist relations of production. It is her assertion that we all have the "power of nurturing" within us that communicates a faith to believe in self. The belief of a Black trans mother's power of nurturing in anti-black world that refuses to

¹⁶³Carmarion D. Anderson, "Happy Mothers Day from Black Trans Advocacy." Filmed May 2015. YouTube video. Five minutes and seven seconds. May 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZd4jyk4OtE>.

even acknowledge her as “mother” disrupts the time and place that (dis)possesses her. In this same video, Carmarion states, “when you know your purpose, God is in a position to place you in line with what your purpose is.”¹⁶⁴ I find this moment to further reiterate the importance of a god-in-self, in this case, through a belief in Judeo-Christian version of “God.”

Prior to the moment when Anderson asserts the power of knowing and walking in your spiritual “purpose” she explicitly states she wants to push “us from thinking about birth in the natural but what we possess on the inside that’s not based off gender.” Her renegotiation of self that challenges a heteronormative reading of mothering as tied to cis-heterosexual (white) women which leads her to reiterate the importance of knowing your purpose. For Anderson, knowing your spiritual purpose enables God “to place you in line” to fulfill your purpose. In this, I read Anderson as offering an alternative way to define and imagine mothering, for Black trans mothers this is of particular importance. It is important to not read Carmarion Anderson’s spiritual message as incidental to her identity as a Black transwoman. I argue that would be a mere attempt to conflate Anderson’s active negotiation of anti-black heteronormative misogyny to be just about mothering in the heteronormative sense. While she begins her message by recognizing that “beyond just my celebrating of my own child and my grandchild, I celebrate the nurturing and the ability that all of us have on this Mother’s Day.”¹⁶⁵ From Anderson, I emphasize her particular emphasis on spiritual purpose, nurturing as power, and power produced through one’s spiritual belief in and connection to elsewhere to consider what it offers re-imagination of Black women’s mothering in intimate state violence more broadly. Anderson offers important ideas here as the spiritual belief in elsewhere through a belief in “God” is powered/engineered from within the self. Even in Anderson’s use of biblical story about a cis-

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

gender heterosexual woman, she uses the application of the story to have faith in “God” and he will “place you in line” with your “purpose.”

What I think is especially important here is not on her faith in God as what empowers her, or Sarah as it is biblically told. It is rather her belief God, in an elsewhere she cannot squarely name or locate, that highlights the power she herself possesses. For Anderson, she describes these powers as “powers of nurturing” which are reflected in her belief in “God” who essentially always resides somewhere other than where we may physically be, in time and place. The faith to believe in self, through a belief and reverence for what is elsewhere, in this case “God,” Anderson describes mothering as a spiritual process of believing in what one produces within one’s self not dictated by gender and sex normativity. It is the belief to believe in self, a power produced from within one’s self as it specifically pertains to mothering that queers the anti-black heteropatriarchal, misogynistic logics that criminalize Black women’s (re)production. Black women’s mothering is criminalized through heteronormative narratives of reproduction as bound to ideas such as “biological,” “natural,” and “sexual.” Her contribution challenges, renegotiates and celebrates mothering that she herself, a Black trans mother align with by disrupting the very notion of what constitutes her mothering, and mothers watching her. Her contribution here demonstrates the way Black women produce their own version of themselves for themselves in contexts that vilify their efforts.

During her appearance on Black Witch Chronicles Alexis Gumbs speaks to the queer(ed) nature of Black women’s spirituality saying, “The truth is, the fact that we are spirits having embodied experiences is a very queer thing; it’s a very strange thing. It’s grounding miracle of

our existence and there is no way to be normal about it and really be doing it.”¹⁶⁶ Gumbs quote here is important as it speaks to the potential Black women specifically possess to love self through caring for self. Here, I draw from biblical power associated with God references that I use to understand the ways Black women empower themselves to navigate the perils of intimate state violence. The god within self here speaks to ways Black women’s religion(s) of self-care empower Black women to mother themselves and all that they produce despite the violent anti-black conditions impacting their lives. Black women’s discourse is spiritual in that it conveys the resilient energies they cultivate provide moments/spaces to attend to the complexities of their (re)productivity. Reading the ways Black women’s discourse in this way disrupts/criticizes white heteronormative gender politics around their mothering, their texts offer a queer(ed) frame through which to re-imagine Black women’s (re)productivity.

During the same Black Witch Chronicles video chat, Lakeesha Harris queer(s) traditional conceptions/approaches to spirituality, cultivating her own through her interactions with the other Black women. She talks about the importance of blurring the lines between/across gender and sexuality which in-of itself offers a queer(ed) frame through which to re-imagine Black women’s mothering. In a move to challenge traditional religious institutions and their treatment of LGBTQIA communities, Lakeesha nurtures her spirit by queer(ing) what it means to be/act spiritually. Queer(ing) is an important process and practice she refers in her contribution which I read as generating rival/alternative frame to analyze complexities of Black women’s (re)productivity.

So the way I see queering is exactly what G just described. Me giving no fucks about none of this [waves hands about in air]. And following my passion, my heart, where my

¹⁶⁶Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Queering the Spirit Work: A Glance at Sexuality and Gender in Spirit Work.” Filmed July 1, 2015 YouTube video. One hour and nine minutes. July 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZjNUjsYYac>.

spirits lead me, with my spirit ear. That is going into the queer, the untapped source or maybe the tapped sources that we really haven't been listening to. Blurring the lines of gender, blurring the lines of sexuality or what it means to have sexuality in this space. Also blurring the lines between, I believe, religious practices that oftentimes keep women oppressed, keep LGBTQIA oppressed. All those rigid rules that only work to keep us confined in a way and away from knowledge"¹⁶⁷

Harris' excerpt calls attention to the ways Black women employ the notion of God-in-self as they negotiate their own spirituality. Her contribution queer(s) a traditional sense of spirituality in that Harris does so with a specific focus on sexuality. Instead of relying on and building from exclusionary religious spaces, Harris' excerpt prompts us to consider what her negotiation may offer toward re-thinking Black mothering and self-care. In this moment, I interpret Harris as engaging in a form of Black mothering as she speaks the ways she allows her "spirit ear" to guide her as she explores the untapped and tapped sources that "we really haven't been listening to." This appeals to a sense of Black mothering as Harris renegotiates a sense of self through the confines of the place to understand herself in completely different terms. In reference to "my heart" and "my passion" Harris is not only queer(ing) traditional sense of spirituality but she is also queer(ing) the time and place her negotiation imagines the death of in the moment she speaks with her fellow Black Witch Chronicle sisters. When Harris points to her life journey as one that must be negotiated by her spirit ear, she points to the importance of the inner self as the arbiter of her actions.

Rather than seek out an external relationship to a God-like figure as governed by traditional religious practice, Harris seeks the God within where the self is not bound by the

¹⁶⁷Lakeesha Harris, "Queering the Spirit Work: A Glance at Sexuality and Gender in Spirit Work." Filmed July 1, 2015 YouTube video. One hour and nine minutes. July 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZjNUjsYYac>.

“rigid rules” and the social constraints governing religion. Her queer(ing) of the traditional sense of spirituality, as disruptions, confirm Harris’ acknowledgment of the power within her own “spirit ear to guide her as she negotiates her life journey queer(ing) time and place that limits access keeping them “away from knowledge.” Here, I read her as queer(ing) in line with Harris’ discussion of “blurring” lines confining knowledge through normative articulations of sex and gender in anti-black heteropatriarchal, misogynistic world. In “blurring” the lines of gender and sexuality as well as those between religious practices that inflict violence particularly on LGBTQIA folks Harris disrupts the very time and place she identifies as attempting to keep them away from knowledge.

Harris’ insights are important in a discussion of Black women’s mothering as her contribution demonstrates the significance of God-in-self as means Black women utilize to mother self in intimate state violence. The God-in-self metaphor articulated through Harris’s comments central to the notion of Black mothering as her words reiterate the importance of believing in one’s own inner power, produced within one’s self for one’s self first and foremost. Harris’ reliance on her spirit ear to guide her “going into the queer” as time and space to blur lines is a strategy of Black mothering. Mothering, as I have argued, that concerns a consideration of care for one self is simultaneously powered through one’s belief in self, anchored in what I contend to be a spiritual elsewhere. In thinking briefly back to Anderson, her belief in “God” is what reiterates a power she affirms within herself, produced within herself expressed through her reverence of God in the biblical sense. I read Harris’s contribution as revealing a similar tendency as she relies on the power produced within herself as means to assist her in negotiating the confines placed on mothers in anti-black heteropatriarchy. For Anderson, the confines she alludes to were physical and biological while the confines that Harris speaks to, I believe in

conversation with what Anderson asserts, the confines of knowledge. Reading these two women's contributions, through an Afrafuturistic feminist frame provide space to re-imagine the ways Black women understand their own mothering through a consideration of the spiritual means they employ to do so. Harris disrupts normative scripts on gender identity, sexual identification, and religious belief by creating or (re)producing her own spiritual guide that acknowledges her as a sexual being. However, her discourse does so by actively "blurring the lines" between gender/sexuality and religious/spiritual practice and the relationship between the two.

In essence, Harris argues for the violation of "rigid rules" of gender and sexuality and their relation to social institutions designed to denigrate and constrain. Blurring these lines within religious practices is a move to complicate attempts to exclude the queer from normative black spaces. Thus, Harris articulates a method to create opportunities for queer Black women to redefine themselves as both spiritual and sexual beings. Generating space through the (re)production of discourse to redefine themselves in a society that criminalizes them through their sexual and mothering practices. In questioning the normative connections/linkages between sexuality and gender for Black women produces a queer(ed) sense of spirituality in that it rejects any anchoring by patriarchal and homonormative religious doctrines, while reframing a queer relationship to biblical conception of God. Across Pinkett-Smith, Harris, Morrison and Anderson's contributions, they draw attention to the ways Black women's discourse cultivates a means to consider and reflect on the complexity of their (re)productive lives within structural violence. Black women's discourse, as indicated in aforementioned excerpts, generates rival moments and spaces to acknowledge complexity of their public and intimate lives. Anderson's comments, read through an Afrafuturist feminist frame, provide an alternative frame to examine

the ways Black women negotiate themselves and their mothering in never-ending structural violence.

Following the death of her children, Mavis sets out on an uncharted journey to discover/find/love herself which is a very spiritual journey/process. Morrison's character construction presents Mavis as a failed mother and a wife. Her children die after she mistakenly leaves them in the car. After confessing to her mother that she believes her husband has convinced her other living children to try and kill her, Mavis overhears a conversation between her mother and her estranged husband. Desperate to escape abuse and her imminent (at least in her mind) murder Mavis is at a pivotal moment in her life. It is in this moment of escape that Mavis chooses self-care and god-in-self in the choice to leave her family:

In a week Mavis was on the road, but this time she had a plan. Days before she heard her mother talking low into the mouth piece of the telephone, saying, 'You better get up here fast and I mean pronto,' Mavis had walked around the house, while Birdoe was at the Play-Skool, thinking: money, aspirin, paint, underwear; money, aspirin, paint, underwear...At a Goodwill she bought a light-blue pantsuit, drip dry, and a white cotton turtleneck. Just right, she thought, for California. Just right.¹⁶⁸

The violence that Mavis experiences in her every-day life prior to the death of her twins that we, as readers are not privy to, play a role in her decision to leave her remaining children behind. The journey that Mavis embarks on, leaving behind everything and everyone she knows, is a spiritual one. Mavis' story provides an opportunity to focus on the ways that Black women respond to anti-black gratuitous violence, mothering themselves to preserve their minds, spirits, and souls. In the moment that Mavis decides to leave her remaining living children and abusive husband, to

¹⁶⁸Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: First Plume Publishing, 1999), 32.

care for herself, her mothering disrupts anti-black heteronormative constraints working to destroy her. We are introduced to Mavis after the death of her twins which is purposeful on Morrison's part as there is no frame of reference in which readers are granted about her characters. From the opening scenes to halfway through Mavis' first section in the novel, we see a change in Mavis as she sets out to free herself from the abusive, violent intimate life she knows. The spiritual journey that Mavis embarks on is in response to the anti-black logics that keep her open to physical and sexual abuses in civil society that produces heteronormative stigmas criminalizing their mothering. Mavis' mother's betrayal is a moment to consider the ways Black women's mothering of self oftentimes comes at the expense of other Black women. Mavis' mother's betrayal is the means by which she attempts to recoup her black woman-ness praised in anti-black heteropatriarchal families, as her mother no doubt also sees/treats Mavis as failure. Her mother's perception of her daughter as a failure is confirmed as she reminds Mavis that she has children who are still alive that need their mother. After stirring enough courage to leave her children and her abusive husband, Mavis reveals her fears to her mother regarding her children's plot to kill her with the help of their father.

The journalist's pointed questions already assumed Mavis' failure as a mother. The interaction between Mavis and the journalist in the context of the everyday abuses she suffers by her husband are important in reimagining Mavis' (re)production as queer(ing) time and space of her containment. The interview Mavis has with the journalist bring attention to the social stigmas assigned to Black women that always already perceive Black mothers as deviant and unable to produce properly. As Mavis recounts the moments leading up to the tragic suffocation of her twins to the journalist, it becomes clear that her motives leading to the twins unforeseen death

revolved around her attempt to please Frank.¹⁶⁹ The journalist's questioning of Mavis' account of what happened to her children remains a reflection of the ways Black women are always already perceived lazy and irresponsible, both toward themselves and especially their families and children. The journalist says, "Your babies suffocated, Mrs. Albright. In a hot car with the windows closed. No air. It's hard to see that happening in five minutes."¹⁷⁰ The interview is to recount the story of her failures as a Black mother, not an interest piece into the personal life of Mavis before the death of her twins. The anxiety surrounding her nights in bed next to Frank who not only abuses her physically but imposes his authority over her sexually impact Mavis' decision to go get the weenies from the store. The violence impacting Mavis' decision to take the twins to the store to please Frank in attempt to thwart a night of physical and sexual abuse is completely ignored in her interview. The journalist asks, "Didn't you know your husband was coming home for supper, Mrs. Albright? Doesn't he come home for supper ever day?"¹⁷¹ The logics embedded in the journalist's "questions" presuppose failure and wrongdoing of Black women. The state-sponsored violence in conjunction with social stigmas and the physical and sexual abuse highlight the complex, messy logics of constraint that constrict her in a particular time and place. The messy logics of time and place articulated through romanticized heteronormative, misogynistic appeals to family mothering and sexual reproduction via blood and biological ties lead Mavis to revolt. Mavis' story offers an example of the ways Black women respond and react to the anti-black(woman) violence they navigate.

For Black women, facing intimate forms of violence in context of already existing intimate state violence, Mavis' response to constraints that condemn her to a life constantly open to abuse in both public and intimate space is a mothering strategy. Themes of spirituality,

¹⁶⁹Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: First Plume Publishing, 1999), 23.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, 32.

resilience, and truth-telling are powers Black women produce within themselves. It is in the moment Mavis decides to mother herself that she conjures spirit, power within herself to life for herself. Of course it is not an easy journey as Mavis' own mother attempts to thwart her efforts. Mavis' belief in an elsewhere, established in opposition to heteronormative treatment of mothering that I argue we can imagine the death of these relations through her decision to journey to California. So much so that she rehearses in her mind continuously that she has what she deems essential as she says repeatedly "money, aspirin, paint, underwear." It is Mavis' resilience and belief in an elsewhere with its location even unknown that her empower her to break away from traditional assumed protections of family and mothering. For Mavis, these are the items she deems "just right" in caring for herself on her spiritual journey toward California. Bound by anti-black heteronormative logics that condition her (re)productive life around her mothering children, Mavis's decision to leave her family is an act of self-care.

Rather than focusing on Mavis' cultivation of religion of self in relation to the Covenant and biblical texts/teachings, I focus on Mavis' journey leading to the Covenant as producing/practicing her own religion of self-care in her decision to leave her family and the rest of her children behind. I read this as an alternative practice in that the decision to leave her family reflects a love for self that centers/anchors Mavis' religion of self; demonstrating choice despite the logics of gender and racial constraint, she chose herself, she chose to *see* the god in herself. She chose to *take* power, a critical strategy for black women's survival of anti-blackness. However, I re-read Mavis as actually fulfilling her duties as a mother despite her decision to leave them behind on her journey to self-discovery and happiness. Scared for her life, Mavis finds the courage to first flee her abusive husband and her children whom she believes are out to kill her. Her decision to leave behind her children is a practice/move toward self-care that

nurtures the self. Mavis' story presents moment to consider the importance of understanding Black mothering as about first and foremost the Black woman herself.

Mavis' negotiation of self through refashioning ideas self in relation to family and community prompts discussion of balance Black women struggle to find as they mother themselves and those around them. Balance, is important for Black women considering the heteropatriarchal, misogynistic narratives that shame Black women for caring for themselves. For example, the following excerpt which takes place during an interview of sorts between Jada Pinkett-Smith (actress and producer), her mother, and her daughter Willow. In a poignant moment during the interview, Willow asks her mother to tell her what she thought was hard about being a wife and mother. Pinkett-Smith speaks candidly with her daughter as she tells her that the most important thing she can do as a mother is to always take care of herself first.

“I think we've been taught that taking care of yourself is a problem. Let me tell you something about being a mother and some of the messaging we get in this country about being a mother. That you have to completely sacrifice everything that you have to completely sacrifice every single thing. And I think that the re-messaging that we as mothers need to have and gravitate to is, you have to take care of yourself in order to have alignment and the power to take care of others at the capacity we do (stated with passionate emphasis) because it fills the well. What I believe I do takes so much energy, so much work from the heart, spirit, and creativity that I have to be responsible enough to take care of me. Because you know what happens if you don't, imbalance. And then I'd be looking to you, making you responsible for my happiness...so what I had to do and

had to learn was how to get more balance[d]...the more happy I am and fulfilled I am, works for the family. And when I'm not, it doesn't, its that simple."¹⁷²

In this moment, Pinkett-Smith's conversation with her daughter, as her own mother looks on regarding the importance of self-care is significant. The question that prompts her response, "what is hard about being a wife and a mother," for Black women is a complex and difficult question to answer especially considering a violent, abusive home/intimate life like Mavis in Morrison's *Paradise*. Pinkett-Smith's emphasis on finding balance as the most difficult part, for Black women, highlights what is so complex about Black women's (re)productive lives. Finding balance is the perpetual and ongoing challenge Black women must navigate as part of their (re)production to maintain the God in self. However, what this quote communicates simultaneously is that Black women's response to the structural violence they remain trapped in has been to take care of themselves. In taking care of themselves, as Pinkett-Smith implies, Black women can better care for/nurture others especially their children. Black women's concern for self, as expressed by Pinkett-Smith, reiterate the importance of them discovering and preserving the Godly-ness within themselves. It is the Godly-ness produced within Black women that equips them with the power and resilience needed to navigate their (re)productive lives, producing social life in social death. Her mention of the energy it takes to do what she does reiterates the importance of Black women finding things for themselves that make them happy; while taking care of others can and does make Black women happy, establishing lives for themselves is a central part of their (re)productive lives in anti-black suffering.

Black women's lives as mothers are complex considering the violent, exploitative histories surrounding their (re)productive lives. Destruction in more than the political and

¹⁷²Jada Pinkett-Smith, "Red Table Talk." Filmed May 10, 2012. YouTube video. 18 minutes and three seconds. November 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wi8guMA9_Hc.

physical sense but the spiritual sense as well. Thus, the magical ability of Black women to produce life in social, structural death is rhetorically compelling. More than compelling and inspirational, is a relentless effort on behalf of these women to find a way to have a say in their lives. Here, I mean that Black women have not and will never idly sit by and allow the world to convince us that we are what they say we are. What I find interesting across these examples, through these discourse moments, is the various ways Black women have chosen to fight for some sense of self through and oftentimes despite their interactions with others. I read these negotiations as spiritual practices in which Black women look beyond themselves to muster resilience and strength despite hardship to cultivate lives for themselves.

Closing Chapter Thoughts

Thinking about the ways Black women establish intimate and public lives for themselves does something in a world that consistently devalues their ability to produce let alone survive. These texts exude/demonstrate a spirit/energy that appeal to the magical ways Black women produce the (im)possible. I find it important to consider such in relation to the ways they balance love for self through and despite relations with others as it contributes to context in which I re-imagine Black women's (re)productivity. Love for self, as I have discussed it here, is always already entangled in Black women's relationships with others including their children. In Chapter Six, I argue that the ability to cultivate resilience, across time and space, despite time and place, by way of critique is the type of Black girl magic Black women possess/produce. It is magical because it produced elsewhere, through "Our Time." These women use their lives as testimonies to challenge and disrupt the dominant narratives and tropes created to contain Black women, insuring their continued abjection.

CHAPTER SIX: MAGICAL MELANIN

Black women's capacity to (re)produce in structural violence is magical precisely because it is oftentimes unexplainable how they manage. Their magic, produced through their (re)productive labor, speaks to the power and depth of Black women's resilience; a resilience consistently produced across time and space that frames and fuels their historical (re)productivity. In essence, Black girl magic is important in theorizing Black women's lives in intimate state violence as it focuses on the ways they attempt to live their lives to the fullest. Discourses concerning Black girl's magic offer moments to consider how Black women empower themselves as they negotiate and protect their (re)production across time and place. In challenging time and place via their (re)productivity, Black women also challenge the authority organizing time and place to assert their self-determined power. Black women's (re)production via their discourses, I argue, point to the ways Black women create space for themselves as they challenge the mythical boundaries enforcing their (dis)possession. The religions of self-care that Black women create, producing elsewhere(s) to refashion themselves in the anti-black world, act as fertile ground/soil that has given birth to idea of Black girl magic. More specifically, it provides a nuanced lens to examine the particular strategies that Black women employ to create social life in social death. I consider how Black women's (re)productive labor enables them to assert their self-determined power. Black girl magic, in this chapter, refers to the legacy and

revolutionary heritage that Black women create and sustain on the strength of their (re)production.

Black women's rhetorical practices concerning Black girl magic disrupt time and place in their appeal to Black girl's magic that publicly highlights Black women's (re)productive labor. Black women draw from and on their revolutionary heritage of (re)production in ways that actively confront the mythical authority of anti-blackness that criminalizes them. Black women's (re)production provides means in which Black women acknowledge and assert their power over themselves and the worlds they create. In thinking about the worlds Black women create, I particularly focus on the ways that Black women's mothering of self through revolutionary heritage mothers space for kinship and community. In other words, Black girl magic presents an opportunity to analyze the ways Black women cultivate their own ideas concerning kinship and community. This is important as it continues to demonstrate that Black women's mothering, while centered on concern for self, is intimately connected to notion of family, community, and culture. The trace I contend that Black women's (re)production leaves serves as guiding light, or beacon for younger generations of Black girls and women. In leaving this maternal trace, I contend that Black women's rhetorical practices concerning their mothering and (re)production disrupt time and place. Black girl magic provides necessary texture to analyze how Black women disrupt the time and place that endorse gratuitous sexual violence. In this chapter, I focus on the ways Black girl magic acts as a site/source of knowledge that Black women draw from and on to empower themselves through their (re)production. Moreover, this chapter analyzes Black women's rhetorical practices as moments that disrupt the authority of time and place, re-centering a concern for themselves and the networks/communities they establish. Black women's rhetorical practices demonstrate a refusal to allow the outside world to define them.

The decision to expose, name, and challenge the structural nature of Black women's (dis)possession provide the frames necessary to examine the complexities of their mothering strategies in anti-blackness. Seeking out a means of living their lives within social death entails Black women dreaming, loving, and expressing themselves in public and social spaces. Black girl magic highlights the complexities of Black women's mothering practices and the normative discourses associated with it. Black girl magic draws on and from Black women's past and present labor to spark creative energies designed to produce strategies for living in relation to intimate state violence. Cashawn Thompson addresses the importance of Black girl magic saying, "We're using it to celebrate ourselves because historically Black women haven't had the type of support that other groups have...Black Girl Magic tries to counteract the negativity that we sometimes hold within ourselves and is sometimes placed on us by the outside world."¹⁷³ Here, Thompson notes that Black Girl Magic is designed to "counteract" normative discourses that devalue, dehumanize and criminalize Black women. The historical nature of such devaluations of the Black woman signifies the constitutive nature of past narratives of Black womanhood as a reiterative force. The passage of time is important to this author's description of Black Girl Magic, as it speaks to the calcification of anti-black gender norms, but also the necessity of building counter discourses in an effort to re-invision the present while in conversation with the past and dreaming of the future.

When Thompson notes that Black Girl Magic is about the celebration of "ourselves" she attempts to build upon the notion of Black women as a cooperative community from which counter discourses on Black women should be produced. It is not about the individual Black woman, per se, although the self is important here, instead Thompson speaks to the nature of the

¹⁷³Cashawn Thompson, "Why Are People Arguing About 'Black Girl Magic'?". *BBC Trending News*, Jan 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35263240> (accessed February 4, 2016).

connection fostered between Black women because of their experience of the strategies of anti-blackness that target Black women specifically. The significance of Black women's relationships with each other given the conditions of anti-blackness does not mean that all Black women seek out these relationships or agree on the most effective means of countering these conditions. It is within the messiness and chaos of Black women's negotiation of a racist, heteronormative, misogynistic society that we find the complexity of Black women celebrating other Black women's (re)productivity. While Black Girl Magic has gained in popularity, it does have its detractors. In an article published by Elle Magazine, Linda Chavers' wrote a piece discussing her problem with Black girl magic arguing that it is merely another way to stifle and dehumanize Black women. She asserts that, "Black girls aren't magical. We're human...Black girl magic suggests we are, again, something other than human. That might sound nitpicky, but it's not nitpicky when we are still being treated as subhuman"¹⁷⁴ Chavers' goes on to suggest that something about the hashtag social media movement "doesn't smell right" because "Black girls and women are humans. That's all we are. And it would be a magical feeling to be treated like human beings."¹⁷⁵ Her personal experiences living with chronic illness MS informs her social critique of Black girl magic as stifling because of the rhetorical tropes that stigmatize Black women. Chavers makes specific mention of the "strong Black women" trope to problematize what she understands Black girl magic to be perpetuating. In her view, the magic that Black women have been using in social media hashtags to celebrate presumes that Black women are superhuman which makes it difficult to acknowledge the pain and suffering they experience being both Black and woman. The superhuman-ness that Chavers interprets and critiques in Black girl magic denies Black women's humanness which to her is important. Her stressing the

¹⁷⁴Linda Chavers, "Here's My Problem With #BlackGirlMagic." *Elle Magazine*, January 13 2016 (accessed February 4, 2016, para. 11.

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

importance of Black women's humanity hopes to challenge cultural narratives treating them as animals and objects or superhuman and unbreakable.

Critiquing Chavers, Thompson asserts "Black Girl Magic is the shout out we give-and will continue to give—to one another because sometimes we are hard-pressed to hear a kind word from anywhere else. It's not about black women being exclusive or being superhuman; it's about black women recognizing the humanity in one another that so many others often fail to see."¹⁷⁶ Ashley Ford echoes Cashawn Thompson, inquiring:

How long have black women been told that joy and happiness—green fields and flowers—were somewhere out there, across some line we weren't allowed to cross? How long have white women been running across that line, propelling themselves from our shoulders to get a head start? How many years have our mothers, grandmothers, sisters, cousins, and daughters been asked to make the impossible decision between survival and laughter? We do a lot of talking about the dreams of men, but what of Harriet's dream? She dreamed that black women might flip, skip, saunter, cry, yell, rage, and have access to the full scope of the human emotional experience that was denied us for so long. She wanted us to live our lives, not merely survive them.¹⁷⁷

Directly opposing Linda Chavers arguments, Ford's comments assert that Black girl magic is not about perpetuating the false narrative of the superhuman/superwoman. For Ford, the magic Black women possess is their affirmative production of a self who is capable of dreaming and living

¹⁷⁶Cashawn Thompson, "Black girl magic is the..." in 2015, by Demetria Lucas D'Oyley. *Elle Magazine*, January 14, 2016, para. 5.

¹⁷⁷Ashley Ford, "There is Nothing Wrong with Black Girl Magic." *Elle Magazine*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.elle.com/life-love/a33251/there-is-nothing-wrong-with-black-girl-magic/>, para. 5.

despite their (dis)possession. Ford calls attention to the (dis)possession of Black women as she speaks of the “line” they “weren’t allowed to cross.” In highlighting “the impossible decision between survival and laughter,” as the only options Black women are offered, she argues that Black girl magic is a means through which Black women can do more than “merely survive.”

In essence, Black Girl Magic demands that Black women have a demand that Black women “have access to the full scope of the human emotional experience that was denied us for so long.” Her mention of “Harriet’s dream” is an attempt to draw attention to the ways that Black women’s dreams are often overlooked, while narratives of Black men are privileged and historicized. Saying, “we do a lot of talking about the dreams of men,” is in effort to center concern for Black women’s dreams and the ways they thrive in civil society that continues to tell them they are not “allowed to cross” the line. Despite the critique that Ford levies against Chavers, the beauty of the debate regarding Black girl magic is that Black women are defining themselves for themselves. Although Chavers misses an opportunity to consider the utility of a term created by and for Black women, the passionate discussion she initiates is significant because it demonstrates the ways Black women are negotiating their lives on their terms.

Revolutionary Heritage

The legacies created and left by Black women historically produce spaces for younger and future generations to create their own legacies. The religions of self-care, as discussed in Chapter Five, that Black women employ to mother themselves and the networks they cultivate remain a reflection of the magic they possess within. Part of what makes Black girl magic powerful is its focus on what Black women can cultivate within themselves to negotiate the complexities of their lives in anti-black heteropatriarchy. In acknowledging Black women’s accomplishments publicly, across time and place, Black girl magic is a space that Black women

establish and maintain communal ties. The resilience that Black women have displayed is in part that magic that Black women, across time and place, continue to celebrate. Zerlina Maxwell simply states, “Our Resilience is Magic.”¹⁷⁸ Looking back at Black women who achieved seemingly impossible feats in structural violence serves as motivation and empowerment for future generations of Black women inheriting the struggles of their ancestors. The magic of resilience that Black women exhibit is in Black women’s racial blood that produces generations of Black women inspired and motivated to dream despite the horrors of gratuitous sexual violence. The legacies of labor that Black women have produced leave traces, vestiges that I identify within and across Black women’s public discourse. In their discourses are opportunities to theorize the importance of Black women’s magic as it specifically relates to their mothering. Conceptualizing mothering as first and foremost about a relationship a woman creates/makes with herself, the legacies of Black women nurturing generations through their spiritual practices of self-care demonstrates queer(ed) nature of Black women’s mothering in anti-blackness.

Viola Davis’ mention of Harriet Tubman in her acceptance is an example of why Black girl magic is important to Black women as they look to the past to acknowledge and celebrate their ability to dream and live beyond the line. As the first African American woman to win Emmy for best actress in a drama, her mention of Tubman and the line, challenges the very idea of the line. More specifically, I read Davis’ acceptance speech in line with Ford’s assertions concerning Black girl magic as demonstrating the ways that Black women mother themselves and space simultaneously. In mothering herself, Tubman’s words mother space for future generations of Black such as Viola Davis, Ashley Ford, and Linda Chavers. 'In my mind I see a line, and over that line, I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with

¹⁷⁸Zerlina Maxwell, Twitter Post. January 12, 2016, 3:37 PM. <https://twitter.com/ZerlinaMaxwell>.

their arms stretched out to me over that line, but I can't seem to get there no how,' she began her speech. "I can't seem to get over that line.' That was Harriet Tubman in the 1800s."¹⁷⁹

Davis' speech and this particular excerpt call attention to the power Black women have generated, across time and space, through structural violence. She employs Tubman as the frame through which she chooses to understand the importance of her Emmy win and what it means for Black women. Despite the respectability politic debate that ensues every time a Black woman achieves success and recognition in public. Here I am also thinking about the way that Serena Williams' winning athlete of the year was met with criticism and backlash; the argument against her being that a horse is more athletic and thus more deserving worthy of winning such an award. The criticism, while ludicrous in its own right, serves as a constant reminder of the ways Black women's (re)productivity is never valued. After-all, how can it when the very structures in which these mediated outlets stand function on/through the continued abjection of Black women. Davis's speech demonstrates the resilience that Black women possess and display considering the ways the world denigrates Black women. Tubman's quote within Davis' speech is a clear example of the ways that Black women's public discourse and productions act/serve as space to envision Black women's (re)productivity. Tubman's rhetoric mothers Davis as she expresses her humble gratitude of Black women specifically who came before her (who fought before her) and the Black women working alongside her; demonstrating the ways Black women's magic, that creative spark and spirit that Black women exude through violence anchors Black women's understanding of their own (re)productivity.

In Alice Walker's essay entitled, *In Search of Mothers' Gardens*, she talks about the "living creativity" that mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers pass down to their

¹⁷⁹Viola Davis, "Viola Davis Wins Emmy Awards 2015" Filmed September 20, 2015. YouTube video. Three minutes and fifty-one seconds. November 5, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXcT213XYIA>.

daughters and future generations. In speaking on her mother's love for flowers and gardens, Walker's ability to remember the flowers in her memories of poverty call attention to the revolutionary heritage that Black women's (re)production mothers.

And so our mothers and grandmothers have more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read...Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three countries. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms, sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia's, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...and on and on."¹⁸⁰

Walker's emphasis on generations of Black women and the creative sparks they pass on to future generations of Black women creates/sustains a frame in which Black women situate themselves and understand their lives as Black mothers in anti-blackness. Flowers and seeds continues to ring as an important metaphor as it builds on and speaks to the strange fruit Black women are perceived to bear. Their (re)productivity is criminalized and forever vilified because of the strange fruit they are always already assumed to bear. Walker's quote appeals to talk of seeds and flowers in full bloom demonstrates the very magic that Black women wield as they cultivate social life within social death. Black women's ability to plant seeds deemed strange and unruly and nurture those seeds into mature growth is exemplary of the resilience Black women display under fire. Black women's ability to nurture their gardens, their children, is characterized by Black women like Walker as magic; as magical in nature. Magic, of course, that cannot always be explained; in fact, part of the magic resides in its inexplicability.

¹⁸⁰Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 240-1.

During a webchat for the group, Black Witch Chronicles, a group of Black women engage in deep discussion regarding the importance of queer(ing) spirit work, Alexis Gumbs makes mention of Lucille Clifton and her work on Black astrology.¹⁸¹ Part of queer(ing) spirit work for Gumbs comes from understanding our purpose on this earth despite the violence we are exposed to everyday. Clifton's Black astrology, as discussed by Gumbs, addressing/detailing the purpose of Black folks functions as a type of spiritual discourse that mirrors Black women's resilience in mothering self and others including children in never-ending structural violence. This excerpt speaks to Black women's belief in purpose beyond yet in the world that oppresses them. Purpose is important to Black women's (re)productive lives because maintaining purpose/direction/objective through violence is magic. Although her contribution does not speak directly about Black women and their mothering, her text offers a moment to re-imagine Black women's mothering through the complexity of structural violence. By moment, I refer to the ways that Black women's discourses challenge time and place in intimate state violence, producing alternative spaces from which Black women describe their lives in anti-black gratuitous violence. That is, instead of conceptualizing suffering as the end or foreclosure of living, Black women's (re)production demonstrates the ways they create life within their social death. Gumbs explains:

So one of the things that [Lucille Clifton] did is she wrote a proposal for a manuscript that was never published called Soul Signs that was astrology for Black people in the 70's. It's so deep...what she says is that her astrological reading of Black people in the United States is Gemini sign with a cancer ascending...the way she's describing Black

¹⁸¹Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Queering the Spirit Work: A Glance at Sexuality and Gender in Spirit Work." Filmed July 1, 2015 YouTube video. One hour and nine minutes. July 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZjNUjsYYac>.

people in the United States as Gemini, the purpose of Black people on the planet is to make it clear the two-ness that exists. That we are body and spirit at the same time, no contradiction. We are this and we are that, no contradiction. That's what Black presence on this planet means in terms of the whole cycle of the universe.¹⁸²

In Gumbs building from Clifton's unpublished works, we see in action, the ways that Black women look to other Black women's lives to help them navigate their own struggles against intimate state violence. Legacy of Black women's (re)productivity creates space for Gumbs to develop her own spiritual ideologies. Clifton's move to theorize Black people as possessing some larger purpose beyond the spectacle of anti-blackness, as understood by Gumbs, in conversation about queering Black women's spirituality, generates moment to re-imagine Black women's (re)productivity. In queer(ing) time and place, Black women's (re)production cultivates spaces for Black women and girls to redefine themselves and all that they produce. It is Black women's attempts to create their own worlds despite the ongoing presence of gratuitous sexual violence in their everyday lives that I argue is magical. In other words, her work provides opportunity to imagine Black women's mothering in ways rival to narratives circulated in white heteropatriarchy. The creative, visionary mind of Clifton speaking to this purpose, as introduced by Gumbs, reiterates the significance of legacy for Black women concerning their (re)productive labor in perpetual suffering. Now, I transition to consider the ways Black women draw from their revolutionary heritage to assert themselves as mothers and producers in gratuitous structural violence.

¹⁸²Ibid.

Watering Our Gardens

The magic that Black women exhibit through their (re)productive labor directly challenges the everydayness of their structural (dis)possession. The ways that Black women have strategized a means of (re)producing leaves behind important imprint on future generations of Black women. It leaves behind the idea, for future generations that Black women can and do dream despite the calculated abuse they remain exposed to in anti-black heteropatriarchy. Cultivating and maintaining purpose in structural suffering is one of the elements that queer(s) Black women's mothering in anti-blackness. In the following scene, Eva and Hannah reflect on earlier days in which Hannah asks her mother if she ever loved them. The conversation between Eva and Hannah draws attention the complexity of Black mothering in intimate state violence. Eva's response highlights the complexity of Black mothering as she describes, in intimate detail, the lengths she went to ensure her children stayed alive.

Caught off guard and instantly annoyed, Eva breaks down the ways in which she loved her children. Her conversation with Hannah addresses the complexity of Black mothering through Eva's decision to stay alive for her children. For Eva, that choice is indicative of the love she has for her children. The love that Eva has for children is evident by the extensive measures she undertook to ensure her children's survival as long as she could manage; in other words, the love that Eva has for her children is expressed through her self-identified purpose as a mother to keep her Black children alive in intimate state violence. Eva's purpose is magic. Her purpose, as she explains to Hannah, as their mother, was to keep herself alive. Keeping herself alive is an example of the ways Black women mothered self in order to, like Jada Pinkett-Smith suggests,

take care of others including children, lovers, and friends.¹⁸³ The balance, or negotiation, of life in death as she describes to Hannah the contexts structured to subject Black women, is magical. Despite the circumstances that Black women face, and struggle in, mothers like Eva found a way of out of no way to fulfil her believed duty/obligation as a mother. For Hannah, however, the lack of emotional intimacy and leisurely fun/activities with her mother shapes her perception of what a mother's love looks like. In this complicated moment between mother and daughter, both women's perception of love and expressing said love highlights the importance of how they define love, as Black women, in the context of their (re)productivity.

'I'm talkin' 'bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyes ungrateful hussy. What would I look like leapin' 'round that little old room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name.' 'I know 'bout beets Mamma. You told us a million times.' 'Yeah? Well? Don't that count? A'int that love? You want me to tinkle under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to be playing rang-around-the-rosie? 'But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn't thinkin' 'bout...' 'No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?'¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³Here, I draw on Jada Pinkett-Smith's emphasis on balance and centering a concern for self as primary in order to be able to be there for others. Balance is an important part of what makes purpose magical as it specifically relates to Black women's mothering strategies. Balance brings attention to the complex negotiations that Black mothers like Eva Peace make in order to negotiate life within death.

¹⁸⁴Toni Morrison, *Sula*. 1973. E-book, 2004, 911-969.

Eva's response to Hannah's question offers space to consider the levels/degrees to which Black women negotiate their intimate lives and (re)productivity around mothering, specifically. Eva's decision to stay alive in order to keep her children alive is a powerful recognition that her children's very survival depended on her support and protection.

Her response creates a frame through which we can attend to the complexities of Black mothering in anti-blackness; more specifically, the barriers established to consistently and violently attack, criminalize, and undermine Black women's (re)production. Eva's no nonsense response details Eva's everyday struggle to provide her children with basic necessities. In her mind then, having time for play would have required a giving up on their very survival. For Eva, her children are her garden. She is responsible for caring for and nurturing her offspring in an environment riddled with obstacles and death traps (both figurative and literal). Often, in Black women's discourse, the nurturing of children is about self-sacrifice. Within Black communities, mothers are often evaluated by what they have been willing to sacrifice of themselves for the benefit of their children. Furthermore, as I note in the following examples, Black women develop relational practices with their children from within the narrative of sacrifice. In other words, there is a discursive frame of the sacrifice as a necessary means by which mothers provide their offspring with future potentialities they may not otherwise have access to.

On the Lifetime reality show "Bring It," featuring Black women and Girls, Selena's mothering relationship to Sunjai is an excellent example of the ways Black women demonstrate resilience through expressions of love. These expressions of love and care do not fix or solve the structural paradox Black women find themselves living through. However, Black women's experiences with love and expressing love albeit toward a child, a lover, kin, or friends is a mothering strategy they employ to negotiate themselves in intimate state violence. Through

Black women's interactions with others, including their own children, we can examine the complexity of what it means for Black women to mother and why self-care is a pivotal part of their practices. Selena's and Sunjai's story begins as the audience watches Selena push her daughter to get better and earn a spot on the battle squad. What is interesting in watching the relationship between this mother daughter duo comes as others including Selena's ex-husband JJ weigh-in on Selena's mothering practices. JJ, alongside the other moms, persistently accuse Selena of being overzealous in her mothering over Sunjai. More so, they accuse Selena of living selfishly through her daughter.

In an interview reads Selena as living vicariously through her daughter, stating that she just need to take a step back. He says, in regards to Selena, "Your time is gone ma, and that's Selena's problem is. You're living your life and a dream through your daughter. It' her time now, you to sit there and support her. And if you do that right there'd be less chaos."¹⁸⁵ Over the course of the season, we learn of Selena's story. The audience learns that Selena barely had a childhood becoming pregnant, with her son, from a previous relationship, at age 13. Selena's strategies of support toward Sunjai may be traced back to her own past. Why then the scrutiny of Selena's behavior? Why the criticism by other Black mothers?

Watching Selena's interaction with Sunjai, I argue, is a complex negotiation of self through other; that is, through mothering her own daughter, Selena is attempting to renew and (re)produce herself through her relationship to her daughter rather than being defined by her past. Selena refuses to relent in the way she mothers Sunjai despite the criticism she receives from her ex-husband and the other Dancing Doll mothers. In negotiating a sense of self with, through, and despite others, provide an opportunity to interrogate the anti-black logics that contribute to the

¹⁸⁵Bring It!."Sunjai in Stilettos." 05. Lifetime, April 2, 2014.

violent conditions shaping Black women's mothering strategies. More so, these mothers resilience despite any perceived or self-identified flaws, remain a demonstration of the necessity of (re)producing the self as a key to negotiating their structural (dis)possession.

Selena's mothering strategies, while read as overbearing and excessive, demonstrate a deep investment in her daughter's future. Selena is even accused by the other mothers as living through her daughter instead of just allowing Sunjai to do her own thing, without Selena's pressuring and nagging. Rittany says, "I don't sympathize with Selena, she more worried about herself than her daughter"¹⁸⁶. Selena's constant pushing of her daughter, Sunjai, is in attempt to ensure her daughter has a different life than she had herself. Why is Selena's need/desire to live through her daughter's success read as something that shames her? Selena's mothering strategies are futuristic as she pushed and motivates her daughter to help her go far in life and accomplish more than Selena did her age. It is not to suggest that her mothering strategies are not bothersome to Sunjai. Selena's overbearing nature, when it comes to her children, is criticized by Sunjai who wishes she would "chill out" and take a "step back." The predicament that Selena is seen as negotiating through her daughter's participation with the Dancing Dolls demonstrates the complexity of Black women's lives in structural violence. Selena's lack of guidance concerning growing into adulthood and sexual intercourse contributes to the lack of childhood she hopes her daughter Sunjai never experiences. Selena's personal history alongside her mothering strategies that viewers are privy to generate moments to examine the long-lasting implications of structural violence in Black women's everyday lives. In other words, the interactions between Selena and Sunjai enable analyses concerning the impact of gratuitous sexual violence in Black women's lives. More specifically, in mothering Sunjai's future, I argue that Selena is actively mothering a

¹⁸⁶Bring It!. "You Better Bring It." 01. Lifetime, March 5, 2014.

sense of herself rooted in her daughter's future rather than in her personal past. Her transition from childhood to adulthood reveals the futuristic nature of Black women who mother Black children. Her negotiations are a direct reflection of the anti-black logics that always already castigate Black women as unable to (re)produce properly.

There is a certain magic to how Black women raise and/or care for Black children in intimate state violence. Black girl magic is deployed by Black mothers in passing on, to their children, information and resources that have been acquired over their lifetime. For instance, the Black women coaches of athletic sports teams, understand their role as one in which they use sports as a creative outlet to equip young girls in a manner that helps them thrive in a world that negatively labels them. It is important to consider the ways that Black women love/experience intimacy as spiritual practice considering the anti-woman and anti-queer discourses imposed on how black women live their lives and mother children. In the opening scene of the Lifetime reality series *Jump!*, the coaches for the Floyd Little double-dutch team explain why they formed the team. For the coaches, their commitment is more than just a love for double-dutch. Located in inner city Newark, New Jersey, the coaches talk about how the team helps them teach the girls life lessons needed to negotiate a world that stigmatizes them because of their addresses. Their passion for double-dutch and their girls is demonstrated through their passionate rationale behind why they do what they do. Quaniee says:

Double dutch was a way out for me. Having my son at just 15, I had nothing else to do and I was not gonna be another statistic. Just like it was a way out for, I feel it's a way out for these city kid[s]. I want them to know how it feels to take a first-place trophy and

be first at something. We don't just teach double-dutch, we teach these kids life lessons and I think its bigger than the ropes.¹⁸⁷

These Black women who act as mothers to their girls understand their role as coaches to be teaching their girls self-confidence and self-esteem through competition. These women look to shape these young girls outlook on life considering the stigmas people associate with Black women in inner cities like Newark. The coaches decision to start the team to help young Black kids is a demonstration of and reflection of Black women's magic. Their magic, as it pertains to their mothering, is displayed through their passionate commitment to train/mother these girls for the lives outside the ropes. Quaniee's recognition that what they are doing for these girls as being "bigger than the ropes" highlights the complexity of Black mothers tasks in structural violence. In light of Quaniee's personal experiences with having a child at a young age, she uses the Floyd Little team as a means to help her girls find a different path. There is something magical about the way these coaches remain passionately invested in teaching their girls life lessons as it pertains to their lives as Black women in the inner city.

Finding ways and outlets for young Black children in violent neighborhoods, especially for young Black girls, Laila and Quainiee act as mothers in their own ways. Although understood as "coaches," the roles these women take on simultaneously mirror those of Black mothers historically. The two coaches desire to teach these girls, providing them with rewarding experiences, I argue, reflects Black women's historical commitment to mothering future generations. Mothering, as I understand it, functions with a particular set of objectives considering the anti-black world Black women know exists. There is a magic to training these young Black girls for life, more specifically for adulthood and the violent transition that ensues

¹⁸⁷Jump!. "The Rivalry." 01. Lifetime, April 10, 2015.

as these coaches instill sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. Black women's ability to empower young Black girls to grow up confident in themselves and their abilities is best described as magical because of the violence and chaos it happens in.

Despite the inheritance of violations, the anti-black world imposes on Black women, these women's contributions signal the many and varied ways that Black women cultivate their own legacy, across time and space to disrupt the anti-woman and anti-queer discourses that haunt her. The Black women coaches previously discussed is one of many instances in which we can witness Black women using their experiential knowledge in anti-blackness to uplift future generations of Black folks. As mothers, in a number of capacities, hetero/blood and other mothers, this magic is simultaneously deployed by Black women to cultivate knowledge to help uplift Black children. Black women possess type of magic that is deployed to embrace a number of spiritual practices to ensure their survival and social life in social death.

CHAPTER SEVEN: MOTHERING STRANGE FRUIT

*Our survival requires we alter our environment so we can live*¹⁸⁸

In this final chapter I review the significance of my study for rhetorical studies, what it contributes to the field of Communication Studies, and potential areas for future research on Black women's subjectivity and their negotiation of anti-blackness. First, I provide a summary review of each chapter. In Chapter One, I discussed relevant academic literature on Black mothering and the historical struggles Black women have faced concerning their sexual expression, mothering and maternity, and (re)production. I argue that the absences and erasure of Black women's particular histories concerning mothering and (re)production in rhetorical scholarship in Communication Studies warrant in-depth, nuanced examination of their rhetorical practices. In Chapter Two, in consideration of Black women's ongoing struggles with mothering and (re)production, I proposed an alternative rhetorical framework, Black Maternal Futurism, to analyze Black women's discourses and cultural artifacts. In addition, I specifically discuss the utility of an Afrafuturist feminist theoretical perspective within a BMF framework to study Black women's use of rhetoric and language to navigate anti-black violence.

In Chapter Three, I deploy rhetoric as a tool to examine the ways Black women describe the anti-black contexts they mother themselves and their children through. In this chapter, I focus

¹⁸⁸June Jordan, "A New Politics of Sexuality," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New York Press, 1995), 410.

on the inheritance of violations Black women receive as mothers and producers, arguing that their rhetorical practices engage in a queer anti-black time and space. In queer(ing) time and place, Black women's rhetorical practices offer rival moments to consider how they produce lives for themselves in and through systemized suffering. In Chapter Four, I examined the ways Black women negotiate themselves in contexts that isolate and shame them via anti-black heteronormative sexual politics. I analyze the ways Black women understand isolation and shame as playing a role in shaping their lives as they understand them. Black women's texts offer moments to consider the multi-faceted nature of their sexual, intimate and psychic oppression as it details the particular conditions they are navigating.

In Chapter Five, I focus specifically on how Black women employ spirituality as rhetorical practice to mother self. I argue that Black women's mothering includes a mothering of self which I discussed as their religions of self-care. Black women's religions of self-care are essential in navigating anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic world consistently denying them political autonomy and powers of definition in whiteness. Through BMF, I examined Black women's spirituality as a means through which Black women mother themselves against calculated abuse intent to weaken and harm them. Black women's mothering renegotiated through their religions of self-care continue to demonstrate Black women insistence on defining themselves from power produced within themselves. In Chapter Six, I focus on the ways Black girl magic acts as a site/source of knowledge that Black women draw from and on to empower themselves through their (re)production. Black girl magic draws on and from Black women's past and present labor to spark creative energies designed to produce strategies for living in relation to intimate state violence. The significance of Black women's relationships with each other given the conditions of antiblackness does not mean that all Black women seek out these

relationships or agree on the most effective means of countering conditions in intimate state violence. Now, I transition to consider why Afrafuturist feminist theory and BMF are important when studying Black women's rhetoric across time and space in Communication Studies.

Black women's texts, for me, point to the ways Black women intentionally strategize everyday practices of mothering to protect themselves and all that they (re)produce within the violent boundaries of anti-black heteronormative culture and consciousness. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter Two, BMF creates opportunities to analyze Black women's rhetorical practices produced in opposition to disciplinary citizenship narratives that are unable to theorize the complexities of their lives. Rhetoric, read through BMF, offers a set of analytical tools to re-imagine the ways Black women (re)produce lives of their own in an anti-black world created to destroy them. The discourses that Black women produce concerning their mothering is significant because it enables deeper, more nuanced investigations into Black women's rhetorical practices as produced in an anti-black heteropatriarchal world. BMF and Afrafuturist feminist theory are important to the field of Communication Studies because these concepts provide an alternative way to conceive of and utilize rhetoric to theorize Black women's lives as messy and complex in gratuitous sexual violence.

My rhetorical framework offers a more nuanced approach to and in studying Black women's rhetorical practices concerning their mothering and (re)production. This contributes to the field as it provides an alternative way to theorize Black women's mothering from what they themselves produce across time and space evidenced through their rhetorical practices. Rather than focus exclusively on traditional ideas of mothering such as sexual reproduction, child birth, and rearing, I employ these pathological discourses to interrogate the limits of anti-black heteronormativity as sites of (im)possibility. In BMF, to focus on traditional ideas of mothering,

for Black women specifically, foreclose the opportunity to consider anti-black conditions that necessitate mothering of self. From here, I discuss why it has been important to bring Black Feminist Studies, Afro-pessimism & Afro-futurism, and Black Queer Studies into conversation to interrogate Black women's rhetorical practices in Communication Studies.

It is important to bring these theories together to study Black women's rhetorical practices in Communication Studies in order to theorize their lives in their complexity. It is from rationalizing discourses of state and capital logics that the black subject is born only to be murdered over and over again. There is no end to the perpetual ravishment that dictates Black women's lives in anti-black heteropatriarchy and so it is important to theorize their (re)productive lives within these same contexts. That is, I have argued, the only way that we can attempt to re-imagine what Black women's mothering and (re)production can be within the anti-black contexts that subject them. Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism provide the language needed to theorize Black women's suffering through the ways they challenge the confines of their subjection via mothering and (re)production.

In identifying the sites or sources of Black women's subjection specifically as it concerns their mothering, reflects on the ways Black women refashion these narratives via their (re)production. These theories offer a more nuanced investigation into Black women's mothering and (re)production as a means to negotiate their social lives in social death. Black feminist studies, Afro-pessimist and Afro-futurist studies, and Black Queer Studies allow for the creation of frameworks that consider Black women's multidimensional lives in gratuitous violence. At the same time, they cultivate nuanced frames to consider the ways Black women remain resilient in producing lives for themselves through their own labor. I put these theories in conversation with each other in order to examine the ways Black women navigate their painful struggles while

simultaneously wanting to consider the ways these women create moments to experience joy, love and ecstasy.

For Black women, interrogating relations of power and domination, even in anti-blackness requires a consideration of Black women's lives as negotiating social death through their production of social life. Focusing on Black women's lives means that we look at more than just the violence and death inflicted on Black women. It is well-documented that Black women continue to experience brutal, unimaginable pain and suffering in anti-blackness however it seems insufficient to not simultaneously examine the ways they produce lives and hopes for the future in gratuitous violence. This particular mixture of theoretical impulses and methodological concerns provide a textured frame to analyze Black women's rhetorical practices. The gratuitous violence that Black women experience is not all that Black women experience and feel as they create space and time where they might experience love, joy, and erotic pleasure.

This is not a study about violence inflicted on Black women as they mother. Rather, this is a study concerning the ways Black women mother themselves and all that they (re)produce in structural violence. I approach Black women's rhetorical practices concerning their mothering and (re)production to interrogate their strategies in violent anti-black contexts. In attempts to disrupt the spectacle of Black mutilation as entertainment for white spectators, I focus on the ways Black women maneuver through violence rather than they ways violence regulates them. Now, I move to address why my study is significant to the areas of study I drew from to create BMF to examine Black women's public discourses and cultural artifacts.

Black women's rhetorical practices, analyzed through BMF and Afrafuturist feminist theory, reimagines Black women's subjectivity in the context of their structural (dis)possession. Across time and space, Black women's rhetorical practices refashion anti-black nationalist,

heteropatriarchal, misogynistic notions of blackness, producing practices of self-definitions. This project contributes to the study of Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism as it analyzes the anti-black contexts conditioning Black suffering. My use of BMF theorizes Black women's particular experiences of gendered blackness. This is significant as Black women's suffering specifically is often still subsumed by and erased in interrogations of Black suffering that focuses specifically on Black men. The anti-black heteronormative misogynistic treatment of Black suffering through these limited patriarchal frames foreclose opportunities, even within Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism studies, to consider Black women's particular experiences as (dis)possessed.

The stripping of Black women's gendered subjectivity repackaged in line with anti-black heteronormative logics does not mean that Black women's proscribed (un)gendered status does produce material and ideological situations they are forced to negotiate. Acknowledging how categories such as gender and sexuality reinforce Black women's subjection in anti-blackness, this study examines the ways Black women navigate their material and ideological experiences of gendered blackness. My study interrogates Black women's rhetorical practices for what they reveal about the striking and calculated abuse against Black women as structurally (dis)possessed. Even in recognizing that Black women navigate specific forms of gratuitous violence, Black women's complex lived experiences demonstrate the extensive reach of anti-black logics in Black peoples' lives globally.

My study contributes to Black Queer Studies in its deployment of rhetoric to unpack exclusionary narratives of capital, citizenship, and labor criminalizing Black women's mothering and (re)production. This project's interest in reproduction as a means by which Black women produce a living for themselves in gratuitous violence importantly attends to their complex lived experiences in anti-blackness. The point in my project has not been to theorize Black mothering

as distanced from traditional, heteronormative discourses regarding having and raising children because Black women mother children regardless of their gender and sexual expression. BMF fosters spaces to re-imagine Black women's mothering through, not around, anti-black heteropatriarchal misogynistic narratives subjugating Black women through cultural pathologies. Suspicious of racialized categories of gender and sexuality in capitalist societies, this project rereads heteronormative ideas of family, mothering, and reproduction as sites of futuristic (im)possibilities. In doing so, this rhetorical framework and corresponding concepts enable investigations of Black women's rhetorical practices that challenge anti-black logics regulating gender and sexual normativity, and their maternal subjection.

Analyzing the reliance of anti-black heteronormativity on erotic subjugation articulated gender and sexuality through Black women's rhetorical practices reveal a queer(ing) of time. The queer(ing) of time, I argue, through Black women's discourses and texts concerning mothering are important to Black Queer Studies as these practices demonstrate ways Black women negotiate their mothering strategies in gendered blackness; in doing so, I argue that Black women foster new relationships to blackness through rethinking of their racially gendered subjectivities in perpetual ravishment. In examining the ways Black women disrupt anti-black heteropatriarchal logics of Black (women's) suffering, BMF theorizes about their rhetorical practices to re-imagine ways Black women mother self-defined meanings of themselves and their (re)production. Investigating Black women's (re)productive lives through the organization of time and place as a unique structuring of their (dis)possession resituates themselves and hopes for their futures.

Analyzing Black women's rhetorical practices are important because they contribute to the cultivation of Black feminist accounts detailing Black women's complex lives in relation to

intimate state violence. My study is important to Black Feminist Studies because it considers the complexities of Black women's intersectional experiences within an anti-black world. This particular focus, read through BMF, contributes to Black feminist theory as it offers a more nuanced framework from which to interrogate Black women's mothering and (re)production. BMF is important to Black feminist studies because it examines the ways Black women challenge the confines of their subjection through their resilient efforts to (re)produce. Analyzing Black women's rhetorical practices provides nuanced space to theorize the ways Black women cultivate their own sense of voice, agency, and autonomy in the context of their subjection. This study is important to Black Feminist Studies because it demonstrates the ways Black women's rhetorical practices are legitimate sources of knowledge about rhetorical practice. As legitimate sources of knowledge, I have argued that Black women's rhetorical practices offer moments to consider how Black women respond to gratuitous violence by producing their own epistemologies of Black womanhood. Their rhetorical practices, addressing the conditions of their lives in anti-blackness teach us about the ways they use rhetoric to navigate the anti-black heteropatriarchal world. In highlighting the parameters of their oppression, this study considers the manner in which Black women lay claim to their bodies and (re)productive lives through the use of rhetoric as everyday praxis. In doing so, BMF and Afrafuturist Feminist Theory utilizes the study of rhetoric to analyze Black women's complex negotiation of grammars of suffering that subject them via their mothering and (re)production.

Reflecting on my analysis and the types of texts I read across offering commentary on the anti-woman and anti-queer discourses impacting Black women's mothering, I believe it speaks to the complexity of their (re)production lives. BMF centered analysis examining Black women's rhetorical practices are critically important to addressing the ways power and

domination function in anti-black contexts always already assuming their subjection. To conclude, I discuss future research framed through BMF and Afrafuturist Feminist Theory as it concerns Black women's subjectivity via their mothering and (re)production.

For future projects concerning Black women's rhetorical practices and the means by which they refashion anti-black narratives concerning their lives, I use BMF to explore Black women's sexual expression as experienced in social, political, and religious anti-black contexts. In doing so, I look to interrogate the ways Black women's sexual expression impacts both the mothering strategies they develop and the lives they create for themselves in the process. In thinking about my dissertation study specifically, I look to expound upon my analysis adding additional chapters and texts for my book project. Additional texts might include more autobiographical texts, documentaries, theatre productions, digital media, films, and art to study various spaces Black women produce in negotiating anti-blackness. This wide variety of texts is important as Black women have sought out a number of spaces to re-envision their relationship to themselves and the anti-black heteropatriarchal world around them. Further research might also provide additional contexts such as religious and political institutions to analyze Black women's use of rhetoric as a means to negotiate their survival. These chapters will provide additional texts to examine to the rhetorical complexity of Black women's public discourse as it pertains to mothering and maternity.

The first additional chapter focuses on heteronormative masculinities and the roles these masculinities play in shaping Black women's mothering strategies in anti-blackness. How do performances of heteronormative masculinities function to regulate how Black women express themselves sexually? How do Black women employ rhetoric to challenge constraints placed on their mothering and reproduction without re-centering those same constraints? The second

additional chapter interrogates how white women's rhetoric on mothering contributes to criminalization of Black women's mothering in anti-black violence. How do Black women employ rhetoric to re-imagine their own criteria for what it means to be Black, female and mother? The third chapter considers how religion and politics influences Black women's mothering strategies as it specifically relates to their biological reproduction. How does Black women's use of religious rhetoric(s) work to combat political oppression concerning their mothering and sexual reproduction? More so, despite constraints that religious institutions impose on Black maternity, how do Black women use religious scripture to challenge anti-black heteronormative rubrics of mothering? These chapters, as I envision them, provide additional contexts from which to examine the impact of anti-black violence on Black women's ability to mother themselves and their children.

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