THE AUDACITY TO IMAGINE ALTERNATIVE FUTURES:
AN AFROFUTURIST ANALYSIS OF SOJOURNER TRUTH AND JANELLE
MONÁE'S PERFORMANCES OF BLACK WOMANHOOD AS
INSTRUMENTS OF LIBERATION

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe's identity performances to identify some strategies and tactics Black women use to transgress externally defined myths of Black womanhood. I propose that both of these women use their identity as a *liberation technology* --a spiritual, emotional, physical, and/or intellectual tool constructed and/or wielded by Africana agents. They wield their identity, like an instrument, and use it to emancipate Africana people from the physical and metaphoric chains that restrict them from reproducing their cultural imperatives. Both Truth and Monáe consciously fashion complex narratives of revolutionary Black womanhood as a way to disseminate their identities in ways that "destroy the societal expectations" of Black womanhood and empowers women to reclaim their ability to imagine self-defined Black womanhoods.

I analyze the performance texts of Truth and Monáe using *Afrofuturism*, a theoretical perspective concerned with Africana agents' speculation of their futures and the functionality of Africana agents' technologies. Its foundational assumption is the *pantechnological perspective,* a theory that assumes "everything can be interpreted as a type of technology." When examining Africana agency using an Afrofuturism perspective, the researcher should examine the devices, techniques, and processes – externally or intra-culturally generated – that have the potential to influence Africana social development.

DEDICATION

To

Mason McKinley Reid

and

Leon Darryl Williams, Sr.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very gracious word of thanks goes to all those who have said words of encouragement towards my education - from kindergarten to now.

A special word of thanks goes to my committee members, Molefi Kete Asante, Amari Johnson, and Heath Fogg-Davis.

A tremendous hug goes to my mentor, Iyelli Ichile.

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A metaphoric bouquet of flowers goes to the two who helped me grow and remain calm throughout this process, Doñela Wright and Ifetayo Flannery.

And a kiss goes to Mjumbe Poe, who believes in me unconditionally.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the white and male supremacist environment of the United States deprived Black women[1] of full humanity by making them into a *myth*. The Black woman identity has been "constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress her."[2] The voices and actions of those who identify as Black women are denied in public discourse while the stereotypes that are supposed to represent them are allowed to proliferate. Thereby, externally defined myths of Black womanhood overshadow real Black women in the social environment they navigate on a daily basis.

In the first chapter of his famous text, *The Souls of Black F*olks, W.E. B. Du Bois mentions the problem of the veil. Du Bois asserts that the White race places the Black race, despite their class or income, beneath a metaphoric veil. Looking at Africana people through the veil, they are seen as a negative reflection of Whiteness, and a caricature of

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[1] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 166; James Turner, "Out of Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies" in *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr. (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), 62.
    In this work, I use the terms Black and Africana interchangeably, however they have two different but related meanings to describe the same group of people. The term *Black* serves as a shorthand to describe the culture and experiences of Africana people (particularly those who inhabit the United States) and it linked to biological characteristics that include skin tone, hair, and body shape; However, I also use Black to describe a a political identity claimed by those who were negatively affected by the legacy of white supremacy (enslavement, Jim Crow, colonialism, etc.), and who challenge their own oppression (Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, 1980s Hip Hop, etc.); "Black is a moral judgment to "assert human equality and aim to eradicate doctrines of white supremacy."
    The term *Africana* encompasses the products and experiences of those who are from the continent of Africa or their descendants in other locations due to voluntary and involuntary migration – such as African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans, etc. James Turner, an early founder and adopter of the naming Black Studies programs Africana Studies, asserts that Africana is "derived from the philosophy of the 'African continuum and African consocation,' which posits fundamental interconnections in the global Black experience."
[2] Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997), 439.

themselves. The act of veiling of Africana people disenfranchises them, and allows primarily wealthy white men to cultivate and maintain their privileged status.[3] Because Africana people are veiled individuals, they have a sense of double consciousness, "a peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[4] In a society that privileges stereotypes of Black women, myths of Black womanhood are one of the most prevalent tools that veil Africana women. Africana women are rarely understood in American society as complex human beings. They are, in a way, veiled twice, because they are also seen as a distorted representation of masculinity. When it comes to negotiating their identity, Africana women experience a double or, it can be argued, a multifaceted consciousness. They see themselves as both manifestations of stereotypes and as generators of their own versions of Black womanhood.

Stereotypes are the simplified, generalized, or exaggerated notions and perceptions about Africana women. Externally defined myths (EDMs) are fictional ideas created and used by others (primarily people of European-descent) to obscure the lived experiences of Africana women. "Both myths and stereotypes are fundamentally pictures in the mind created out of imagination, although while the myth tends to mystify reality, the stereotype tends to simplify it."[5] Myths act like social constructs, meaning that, like race, while they are "made up," the affect they have on individuals is real and measureable. Stereotypes and EDMs dominate the American imagination and influence

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[3] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Our Spiritual Strivings," *The Souls of Black Folk.* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1904), 5.
[4] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 3.
[5] Patricia Morton. *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), xvi.

the manner in which Africana women are treated. The justification for many

discriminatory practices has been the veracity of EDMs of Black womanhood. Many

social institutions, i.e. schools, religious institutions, family, friendships, media, etc., have

used stereotypes to maintain "whiteness as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and

entitlement."[6] These social constructs have "historically insured physical violence,

poverty, institutional racism, and second-class citizenry" [7] for Africana women.

In the United States, Africana people have been oppressed because of their racial

difference to white people. They have been enslaved, lynched, dispossessed of

citizenship, mis-educated, and brutalized by police and other government-sponsored

institutions. White women have faced other oppressive conditions under the same system.

They have been disenfranchised due to their inability to vote, objectified, denied the

exclusive right to their bodies, subjected to wage discrimination, etc. Because Black

women are impacted by both racial and gender discrimination, "many of the experiences

they face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender oppression

as these boundaries are currently understood."[8] Struggles against racism and sexism as

shown in the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements, often diminished the

intersectional oppressions that Black women suffered because of the underlying

assumptions that all Blacks were men and all women were white. Even while various

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[6] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 284.
[7] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.
[8] Kimberle Crenshaw qtd in Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality" *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 2, (2010): 129.

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social justice movements in the United States fought for civil rights and equality, Black women have had to make a unique appeal that "Black women's negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by [their] membership in two oppressed castes: racial and sexual."[9]

The Black Feminism movement of the 1970s and 1980s shed light on the history of oppression Black women. The movement involved Black women advocating for the acknowledgement of their unique experience of oppression, and asserting that they also deserve liberation from the socio-political forces which hinder their autonomy. To obtain recognition of the intersectionality of Africana women's oppression, Black women formed Black women's organizations, created art and literature about Black womanhood, and criticized white feminists for overlooking race and Black Nationalist movements for supporting patriarchy at the expense of Black women. They publicized the cruel, often murderous, treatment Africana women received, including the history of sexual abuse by white men and women, the disregard of their womanhood, the denial of their role as mothers, intra-cultural sexism and patriarchy, as well as contemporary discriminations in welfare reform and employment. The Black feminists put particular emphasis on the impact of stereotypes on Black women.

There are numerous examples of Africana women resisting the domination of stereotypes. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, Black Women's Clubs such as the National Council of Negro Women and the National Association of Colored

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[9] Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement" in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2nd Edition, eds Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 30.

Women, strived to change the image of Black womanhood, particularly because of the common assumption that Africana women were sexually immoral. The misconception of Africana women could even be found in the Africana community. Du Bois remarks that his male colleagues believed "out of Black slavery came nothing decent in womanhood; that adultery and uncleanness were [Black women's] heritage and their continued portion."[10] In their activities and publications, Black Women's Club members challenged the stereotypes that Black women were uneducated, uncultured, and hypersexual with alternative images of cultured, educated, and "proper" Black women who were mothers and the pillars of their community.

> *Middle-class Black women, especially those in the Black Baptist Church and within the Black Women's Club Movement, refuted the mythology of Black women's hypersexuality by advocating a "politics of respectability" characterized by cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity.[11]*

In response, Africana women navigated the politics of their sexuality by constructing an ideal Black womanhood that was virginal or married.

In the early 21st century, Twitter[12] and other social media sites are locations where Black women publically challenge oppressive myths. Since 2013, the hashtag, #carefreeblackgirls, has been a digital articulation of Black women recognizing that they are not only complex beings, but they can have a whimsical and cheerful character.

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[10] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women." *The Crisis* 107, no. 6 (2000): S1-S8.

[11] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, pg. 71.

[12] Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'" *Television & New Media* 15, no 3 (2014): 225.
"Twitter is a microblogging site that allows users to send messages of 140 characters or less ("tweets") to people who have chosen to "follow" them.

Elements of the #carefreeblackgirls archetype tend to include, bright colors, smiles, fun locations, creativity, and "finding glory in the little things."[13]

Figure 4: Amina Mucciolo of Studio Mucci

Jamala Johns of the *le coil*, a natural hair gallery website, expresses that the hashtag is a response to the many forces that attempt to dictate how Africana women should act.

> *By putting the word 'carefree' front and center, it's making a statement that [Black women] don't want to be solely defined by hardships and stereotypes ...There's a clear reverence for the difficulties [Black women] might face but an equal focus on embracing the qualities that make them unique and beautiful.[14]*

Black women use the hashtag to label pictures of themselves performing what they perceive to be "carefreeness." They are riding bikes, looking into the sun, hanging with friends, wearing flowers in their hair, and various other "fun" activities. The hashtag allows the women to link with others who share a similar aesthetic and publicize their

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[13] Janelle Monáe, "Victory" *The Electric Lady*. 2013.
[14] Jamala Johns, "Who Exactly Is "The Carefree Black Girl"?" Refinery29 January 30, 2014. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.refinery29.com/2014/01/61614/carefree-black-girls.

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activities. #Carefreeblackgirls essentially creates a repository of images and social media profiles of a community of Black women who, through the internet, disrupt the stereotypical characteristics of Black women being angry, sassy, or downtrodden. The existence of these niche groups demonstrates that Africana women continue to struggle to maintain a complex self-identity in environments that see them as myths. With a history of Africana women's resistance to stereotypes and the presence of newer forms, there continues to be a need to analyze the various methods Black women have undertaken to build self-affirming identities in a self-denying climate.

In this study, I examine how two Africana women -Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe -"act out the characteristics, mannerisms, etc. of their interpretation of the existing tradition of Black womanhood on the public stage,"[15] that is, I analyze how they *perform* a Black woman identity. Sojourner Truth was an activist for the civil rights of Africana people and women's rights during the 19th century. She is well known for her orations, particularly the 1852 Women's Right Convention speech in Akron, Ohio where she is credited for posing the question "A'n't I a woman?" to remind the crowd of the intersectional plight of Africana women. Janelle Monáe is a politically conscious singer/songwriter/producer from Kansas City, Kansas. She is notable for mixing multiple genres of Black music in her songs and wearing a wardrobe of predominately black and white clothing. Science fiction is a prominent theme in her songs and music videos; she often sets her music videos in the future, and in her songs, she refers to concepts such as the apocalypse or time travel.

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[15] Manthia Diawara, "Black Studies, Cultural Studies: Performative Acts" in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, ed. Cameron McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 1993), 265.

In examining Truth and Monáe's performance texts (including but not limited to their actions –both mundane and spectacular - and their material or digital productions, such as books, photographs, websites, etc.), I identify some strategies and tactics these two Black women use to transgress externally defined myths of Black womanhood. I propose that Truth and Monáe use their identity like a *liberation technology* --a spiritual, emotional, physical, and/or intellectual instrument constructed and/or wielded by Africana agents. Africana agents use these tools to emancipate Africana people from the physical and metaphoric chains that restrict them from reproducing their cultural imperatives. I further argue that Truth and Monáe consciously fashion complex personas of revolutionary Black womanhood and then use imaging technologies, like photography and the internet, to disseminate identities that "destroy the societal expectations" of Black womanhood.

In the 19th century, Truth generated an identity of an activist that she named "Sojourner Truth." For most of her adult life, she carefully performed an iconic Black womanhood as a way of combating the many negative depictions of African people in the United States. She produced an alternative visual and written imagery of a revolutionary womanhood – and distributed her text widely. Her performance affected how large groups of people read Black womanhood, and ultimately made Truth into an enduring icon. In the 21st century, Janelle Monáe performs her Black womanhood as a musician in the "real" world, and as science fiction characters in her epic mythological universe. She mostly exists as herself, the quirky Africana woman from Kansas City; however, in her music videos, songs, and stage performances she may play either one of her characters,

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Janelle Monáe[16] or Cindi Mayweather, the ArchAndroid. Monáe acts out these alternative Black womanhoods with identifiable characteristics, such as wide eyes or a black and white suit, in a way that her audience recognizes the identity shift. These distinctive performance texts allow Monáe's audience to co-opt her brand of revolutionary Black womanhood. Her audience can put on the 'uniform' of her identities, and for a time, become Monáe, alterMonáe, or Mayweather. Both Truth and Monáe act with a sense of technological agency; they recognize the value of tools in enacting Africana social change. By providing African women alternative ways to construct their identity, Truth and Monáe are giving them tools in which they can generate their own Black womanhoods and liberate themselves from the burdens of EDMs.

I analyze Truth and Monáe's performance texts using *Afrofuturism*, a theoretical perspective concerned with Africana agents' speculation of their futures and the functionality of Africana agents' technologies. Its foundational assumption is the *pantechnological perspective,* a theory that assumes "everything can be interpreted as a type of technology." When examining Africana agency using an Afrofuturism perspective, the researcher should examine the devices, techniques, and processes – externally or intra-culturally generated – that have the potential to influence Africana social development.

In the following sections, I explain many of the relevant concepts of this study.

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[16] To distinguish between the singer and the character, I designate the character, "alterMonáe."

EXTERNALLY DEFINED MYTHS, STEREOTYPES & CONTROLLING IMAGES

The dehumanization of Black women by perpetuating externally defined myths (EDMs) of Black womanhood dates back to 16th century writings by Europeans about Africans. In the states and empires of Africa before the 16th – 19th century European Trade in African bodies, African societies had established their own characteristics for womanhood. Africana women were essential to societal development. They were the keepers and transmitters of cultural traditions, because they held knowledge of the language, art, history, medicines, and habits of their society.[17] As mothers, they were highly respected because they served as both the protectors of the next generation and "a vital link to the ancestors."[18] The criteria to recognize those in the society who performed as Africana women consisted of a collection of socially conceived factors (such as economics, spirituality, authority, seniority, and number of offspring) that was unique to each cultural group. Community members could intelligently read and interpret the performance of Africana womanhood because the foundation for the markers of womanhood was located in the cultural group's cosmology. Interestingly, due to the cosmological similarities between groups, if a woman traveled to the city of another African culture group, they could presume the intentions of her performance of womanhood without degrading her humanity. African cultural groups could rely on

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[17] Oseni Taiwo Afisi, "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no.6 (March 2010): 230.
[18] Ibid., 232.
In Africana cosmology, humans who have died (under specific criteria) are ancestors. They guide their descendants from the ancestral plane. Because the lifecycle is cyclical, ancestors may return to the tangible realm, through their descendants; therefore the birth of a child is the return of an ancestor.

common patterns of culture when engaged in meetings or confrontations with one another; thereby, all groups shared fundamental assumptions about the humanity of the others.

In early encounters with Africans, Europeans inaugurated an antagonistic relationship between African and European cultural practices. Europeans assumed that the stark differences between themselves and the Africans - indicated that Europeans were intrinsically human and therefore, they were superior to Africans. In the early period of the European Trade in African bodies, Europeans formed the ideology of a hierarchy of races. The white race was superior to all others and blackness became a symbol of inferiority, inherent servitude, and a foil to white-defined civilization. Race became the instrument to regulate social order.[19] This ideology was used to defend the inhuman treatment of Africana people for the next 300 years.

Body shape and attire were significant elements that Europeans used to justify that African women were inferior. Upon gazing at the physiology of African women in a few cultural groups, Europeans determined that Africana women had larger breasts, buttocks, and reproductive organs than European women. "They did not fit the Greco-Roman ideal of beauty, which was bound up with fairness, delicacy, and physical frailty."[20] Moreover, Europeans made assumptions that Africana women were immoral because African clothing norms did not conform to European standards of modesty. "To Europeans, the unclothed African female body denoted Africa's lack of civilization,

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[19] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture.* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), Kindle Edition.
[20] Barbara Bush, "'Sable Venus', 'She Devil' or 'Drudge'? British Slavery and the 'Fabulous Fiction' of Black Women's Identities, c. 1650–1838," *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000): 764.

morality, and normalcy."[21] African women's bare breasts symbolized to European

travelers that they were akin to prostitutes and thus more sexual than 'women' should be.

These two assumptions about African women's sexuality and physiology converged in a

theory generated by European scientists that African women were having sex with

animals. Because Europeans saw their body structure as similar to orangutans, they

surmised that orangutans would grab Africana women in order to have sex with them.

The result of their copulation would be the "missing link."[22] Africana women, therefore,

were at the base of the 'pyramid of civilization.'[23] The proliferation of illustrations of

naked African women in newspapers and travel books brought forth a vocabulary about

womanhood that positioned it in opposition to white womanhood. Black womanhood as

understood by these early encounters with Europeans helped engineer the rationale used

to enslave and colonize Africana people, and laid the foundation for mythologizing Black

womanhood from a white (mostly male) gaze. "During the era of slavery, these ideas

'were molded into a peculiar American mythology.'"[24]

African American women's bodies, personalities, and behaviors are measured

against dehumanizing images that manifested during the era of enslavement. The

'standards of Africana womanhood' have been consistently revised to correspond with

the racist/sexist milieu of subsequent eras (i.e. Jim Crow segregation, the 80s, post-

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[21] Ayo A. Coly, "Un/clothing African Womanhood: Colonial Statements and Postcolonial Discourses of the African Female Body," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 33, no. 1 (2015):14.

[22] Jan Nederveen Pietersie, *White on Black: Images of Africans and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 38.

[23] Barbara Bush, *Women's History Review*, 764.

[24] White qtd in Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images the Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*, (Westport: Praeger, 1991), xiii.

racial/Obama administration). Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are the most persistent stereotypes that distort how Africana women are perceived in a racist/sexist environment.

Mammy, which originated around the end of the Antebellum Era of the United States, is a myth to support the exploitation of Africana women's domestic labor (cooking, cleaning, and childrearing) in white households. The physical characteristics of Mammy are exaggerations and simplifications of Africana women body parts. Mammy is often depicted with a dark brown or black skin tone, a thick body shape with large buttocks and breasts, and a large tooth-filled grin. In media, her pleasant personality reinforces "the mythology of the happy, docile, servant."[25] She is portrayed as having an unwavering loyalty to the white family for which she works, often at the expense of her own family. During the last half of the 1800s, "when Black women were transitioned from unpaid house slaves to paid domestic workers,"[26] Mammy signified that the new for-pay domestic service did not disrupt the previous submissive relationship between Black women and white households. Aunt Jemima, the Quaker Oats company pancake mix mascot is an enduring Mammy figure who continues to occupy a coveted spot in the pantry of many American homes. She serves as an innocuous reminder of the fantasy of "happy" Black women serving white society in post-racial America.

Deborah Gray White, in *Ar'n't I a Woman*, argues that the formation of the stereotypes of Mammy and Jezebel occurred simultaneously in American history. Mammy represented Black women's docile servility and Jezebel represented Black

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[25] Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Phillips. "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts," *Sexuality and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2003): 9.
[26] Ibid.

women's lasciviousness. During American enslavement, White slaveholders legally owned the bodies of enslaved Africana women; therefore, they could rape Black women without consequence. At a time, the rationale for white slaveholders to rape Black women was bewildering, because upper to middle class white men should not have been sexually attracted to Black women who were considered inferior and ugly in comparison to white women. To explain the prevalence of white slaveholders sexually abusing enslaved Black women, a mythology about Black women's insatiable sexual desires was formed. It was assumed that Black women had a perverse sexual agency, and white people were victims of their hypersexuality. The Christian label for a promiscuous or fallen women, Jezebel was used to describe Africana women; however,

> *The reality was that the Jezebel was a sexually abused African American woman used to fulfill the masters' sexual and economic needs. The children she bore from these rapes added to his slave stock, as the legal system did not recognize that slave women could be raped and decreed that the children born from these unions gained the same status [of slave] as their mother.[27]*

Even within the Black community, this mythology of Black women's sexual impurity and hypersexuality influenced negative assumptions about Black womanhood. Du Bois reflected that his colleagues expressed, "out of Black slavery came nothing decent in womanhood; that adultery and uncleanness were their heritage and their continued portion."[28] The history of Africana women subject to the licentiousness of white slaveholders built "the myth that Africana women were not as pure as white

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[27] Dionne Stephens and Layli Phillips, *Sexuality and Culture*, 8.
[28] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women," *The Crisis* 107, no. 6 (2000): S4.

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women and not worthy of respect,"[29] and it obscured their victimhood within and outside of their communities. This circumstance compelled many Africana mothers and fathers to warn their daughters that they may find themselves in situations where they may have to choose between their dignity and their survival because of the negative perceptions of Africana women.

The label Sapphire comes from *Amos 'n' Andy* character of the same name, who "was seen as nagging, emasculating, shrill, loud, argumentative, and a master of verbal assaults."[30] The Sapphire character was created in the 1930s, and the name was used to describe a derivative of the Mammy stereotype, the Sassy Mammy. While Mammy symbolized that Black women's role was to maintain white households, Sassy Mammy signified that Black women were the cause for the failure of Black families. Media depicted Sassy Mammy as being verbally and physically abusive to her own Africana husband and children. She "wore the pants" in the family, which insinuated that the African American family had inverted, and thus deviant gender roles.[31] After enslavement, Sassy Mammy served to establish Africana women as loud, angry, power-wielding matriarchs who emasculate Black men. This portrayal was used to demonstrate that the Black family structure was pathological due to Africana women taking on the role of men. The 1965 government report *The Negro Family: A Case for National Actio*n, more famously known as the Moynihan Report, used the matriarch imagery to form its

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[29] Alice R. Brown-Collins and Deborah Ridley Sussewell, "The Afro-American Woman's Emerging Selves." *Journal of Black Psychology* 13, no. 1 (1986): 5.
    [30] Anita Jones Thomas, Karen McCurtis Witherspoon, and Suzette L. Speight. "Toward the Development of the Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale. *Journal of Black Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2004): 429.
    [31] Dionne Stephens and Layli Phillips, *Sexuality and Culture*, 40n2.

conclusion that the Africana Community cannot achieve economic and social stability because it deviates from the white American norm of "male leadership in public and private affairs."[32]

Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and their modern descendants Welfare Queen, Gold Digger, Gangster Bitch, etc. "are ingrained in the social fabric of society."[33] They appear frequently in movies, television, internet memes, literature, art, music, and social policy. In the 2011 film, *The Help,* the plot revolved around Black women domestic workers and their white female employers during the 1950s and 60s. Although the film mentions the Africana women's struggle for fair treatment in their workplace, the storyline is dominated by their activities as good Mammies to white families. In the last scene of the film, Aibileen Clark, played by actor Viola Davis, quits her job with the white family because her employer frames her for stealing. Before she walks away, Clark stops and tells her employers' young daughter, "You is kind. You is smart. And you is important."[34] While the dramatic ending is supposed to show the audience that Clark is now empowered, it also reinforces that her disposition is be a good domestic. Although Davis's acting is exemplary and deserves recognition, the enduring visual of a Black

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[32] *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.* (Washington: [For Sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1965), 29.

The Moynihan Report calls the matriarchal structure of African American community part of the "tangle of pathology" and states that Black women, who have on average obtained higher education at a greater rate than Black men, hurt the chances of American progress for African Americans. The Report states that "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage."

[33] Julia Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, 36.

[34] *The Help*. 2011. Distributed by Walt Disney Studios.

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woman taking care of a white child was what awarded the actor with an Academy Award nomination in the 21st century.

EDMs are powerful because they "work independently and simultaneously" to sustain a false reality of Black women. They affect the variety of information that is circulated about Africana women, and lead people to believe that they understand what it means to be a Black woman. "Common racist and sexist stereotypes of female identity insist that their reality is not mysterious."[35] Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire contain most of the elements that people employ to authenticate an individual's womanhood. This leads to an unjust policing of Africana women's behaviors and activities. In her study of the perception of Africana girls at a public high school, Joy Lei interviews students and teachers about how Africana girls are perceived. One of the prevailing opinions was that the girls were Sapphires; they were "large, loud, aggressive, and visible." Some teachers felt threatened by the behaviors of the Black girls. Lei "observed white male teachers walk away from loud female students in the hallway during class time rather than approach them."[36] These negative assumptions about Africana women's behaviors resulted in punitive responses by those in authority. Charice, a senior, experienced a "'ritual' of being sent to the principal's office by teachers, whether it was her fault or not."[37] Although the general perception at the school deemed that all the Africana girls at the school were loud, the Africana girls themselves felt they were "being outspoken,

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[35] bell hooks, "Facing Difference: The Black Female Body," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics,* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 97.

[36] Joy L. Lei, "(Un)necessary Toughness?: Those 'Loud Black Girls' and those 'Quiet Asian Boys.' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2003): 165.

[37] Ibid., 166.

trying to gain attention, or just having fun."[38] The stereotypes strongly influenced how

people interpreted Black women's action, and distorted Black women's intentions for

their behaviors.

Some Africana women have used EDMs to provide them a degree of safety in

white-owned spaces. When Africana people acted as humans who demanded respect

from whites, they found themselves as victims of physical, economic, and psychological

violence. To increase their chances of survival, some Africana people played the part of a

stereotype that was pleasing to white people, as a tactic to limit the violence inflicted on

them. Before and after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a significant

amount of free Black women could read and write. In order to gain employment as a

domestic from white employers, these women often feigned illiteracy. Literate Black

women were considered "uppity"[39] [define] and in the minds of whites, they would not

make ideal domestics. [40] When Africana women acted submissive, they found they

received less harsh treatment, but it was at the sacrifice of their humanity.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in her work *Black Feminist Thought* clarifies the

meaning of stereotypes, and describes them as *controlling images*. Controlling images are

exaggerations, overgeneralizations, and untruths about African American women. These

stereotypes misidentify the experiences and personalities of Black women. They "guide

behavior toward and from Africana women, constrain what is seen and believed about

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[38] Ibid., 164.

[39] Berdahl, Jennifer L. "The Sexual Harassment of Uppity Women." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, no. 2 (2007): 425. "Taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one's station; presumptuous: 'was getting a little uppity and needed to be slapped down.'"

[40] Bogart R Leashore, "Black Female Workers: Live-in Domestics in Detroit, Michigan, 1860-1880," *Phylon* 45, no. 2 (1984): 118.

them, and when internalized, profoundly influence their self-perception."[41] Controlling

images are used in many social institutions to keep Black women oppressed. For instance

in the federal government, the implementation of 1980s' welfare reform depended on the

stereotype of the welfare queen. The image depicts Black women on public assistance

programs as bad mothers with multiple children, often by multiple partners, "who are

content with sitting around and collecting welfare, shunning work, and passing on her

bad values to her offspring."[42] The mythology of the welfare queen wasting taxpayer

dollars led to public and political support to cut funding for child welfare and job

programs.[43] "Because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of

power, elite groups use controlling images to manipulate ideas about Black

womanhood."[44] Even though controlling images do not reflect the majority of African

American women's lived experiences, more people believe the reality of the controlling

images. Black women's bodies are "never divorced from perception and interpretation."[45]

Controlling images have the ability to influence Black women to view other Black

women negatively. When Africana women see their peers act similar to certain negative

stereotypes, they may try to shame them into behaving differently, or reject their actions

completely. The mediation of stereotypical behaviors that occurs between Africana

women may "lead to a sense of divisiveness among African American women or stress in

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[41] Tamara Beaubouef-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 22.

[42] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 87.

[43] Josh Levin, "The Real Story of Linda Taylor, America's Original Welfare Queen." *Slate.* December 19, 2013. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.slate.com/

[44] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 76.

[45] Carla Peterson qtd in Alex Black, "Abolitionism's Resonant Bodies," pg 622.

interpersonal relationships."[46] Even for the marginalized, controlling images "make

forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday

life."[47] In *Sister Citizen*, a collection of various studies on the effects of the *Strong Black*

Woman[48] on the political agency of Africana women, Melissa Harris-Perry reveals that

Black women's negotiations with EDMs of Black womanhood often compel Black

women to act against their best interests. Because of their adherence to or rejection of

controlling images, Black women "are often too hesitant to demand resources to meet

their individual [and communities'] needs."[49] In the text, Harris-Perry conducts an

experiment to test if Black women support causes that are more conservative as a way to

distance themselves from negative stereotypes. In the experiment, she uses the 1999

Chicago African American Attitudes Study and various interpretations of "a human-

interest news article about an African American single mother of two named Nikki."

From the Nikki experiment, Harris-Perry suggests that Black women would vote against

government assistance programs because Black women did not want to support "welfare

queens." When faced with the decision to change welfare policies, "Black women are

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[46] Anita Jones Thomas, Karen McCurtis Witherspoon, and Suzette L. Speight. "Toward the Development of the Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale. *Journal of Black Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2004): 431.

[47] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 77.

[48] The Strong Black Woman is a myth about Black womanhood invented to empower and encourage Black women. It implies that Black women are survivors and expertly resilient to the oppressions of being a Black woman. While, the Strong Black woman can be beneficial to Africana women, there have been various studies that argue that the Strong Black woman myth can entrap Black women into practicing unhealthy emotional habits and passively consenting to the injustice that affects their lives.

[49] Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

severely judgmental of other Black women whose behavior reinforces negative racial stereotypes."[50]

Harris-Perry also uses *Sister Citizen* to feature the voices of Black women and shows how Black women personally feel about EDMs. One such voice is of Chana Kai Lee, a tenured professor of history, who, after a series of strokes, was expected to teach in order to keep her job.

> *Her physician wrote multiple letters explaining the severity of Lee's condition, but she was pressured to resume teaching because "the state is concerned about sick leave abuse." Reflecting on the humiliating and physically impossible task of addressing a large classroom only weeks after a stroke, Lee saw herself as victimized by familiar stereotypes about women. "Images of a 'welfare cheat' kept playing in my head. Ph.D. or no Ph.D., tenure or no tenure, I was just like the rest of those lazy Black folks: I'd do anything for a cheap ride. I'd take advantage of any situation. I'd exaggerate and manipulate good, responsible, white folks who played by the rules, all to avoid my responsibilities.[51]*

Although Lee recognizes her significant achievements of receiving a doctoral degree, a professorship at a university, and tenure, she experienced *imposter syndrome*, a fear of being associated (or not) with a stereotype.[52] She questioned her own accomplishments because the stereotype of the welfare queen influenced how she was perceived. Her boss and the university, who benefit from the status quo, treated the stereotypes as natural and normal, which forced Lee to sacrifice her physical and emotional health. Lee's situation is an example of how controlling images can coerce oppressed people to support the

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[50] Melissa Harris-Perry, ibid.

[51] Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Kindle Edition.

[52] Anita Jones Thomas, Karen McCurtis Witherspoon, and Suzette L. Speight. "Toward the Development of the Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale. *Journal of Black Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2004): 430.

Imposter syndrome/phenomenon is characterized by "feelings or low self-worth, and a preoccupation of being discovered as an phony."

characteristics of the myths. By doubting themselves instead of questioning the basis for their treatment, Africana women reinforce the power of the stereotypes.

EDMS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Externally defined myths greatly influence how Africana women construct their identity by regulating which characteristics are perceived as authentic or negative aspects of Black womanhood. In Susan Jones' study of the identity development amongst graduate students, she examined how people perceive their intersecting identities and found that while her "visible minority" participants believed they defined their own identities, "external contexts continues to be a powerful influence that required both identity negotiation and the need to manage perceptions."[53] Africana women do not create authentic identities without some struggle, unlike individuals with more privileged identities. Instead, similar to the participants in Jones' study, they focus on managing other's belief in the stereotypes of Black womanhood and question their own self-definitions.[54] Africana women's identity construction involves both coping with the existence of fictionalized accounts of their identity, and generating valid identities from their cultural location.

Identity is a discursive practice; it is the negotiation of a set of physical behaviors and social norms between oneself and the world.[55] Individuals are always renegotiating their identity with the norms, behaviors, and discourses that they encounter. Interactions

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[53] Susan R. Jones, "Constructing Identities at the Intersections: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Multiple Dimensions of Identity," *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 3 (May/June 2009): 298.

[54] Susan R. Jones, *Journal of College Student Development*, 298; Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory (un)becoming the Subject*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7.

[55] Joy L. Lei, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 159.

with other people, events, natural and manufactured objects, etc. adds complexity to the

aggregation of experiences that contribute to how one builds the nuances of one's

identity. The term identity is used to describe both personal identity - an individual's

conception of "self," and social identity –an individuals' expression of group affiliations.

Social groups themselves establish a collection of norms, that, when performed, are

acknowledged as representative of the group. "The social identity may involve sharing a

physical characteristic, speaking the same language or dialect, enjoying a similar social

class, and practicing the same religion."[56] As with personal identity, social identity is a

discursive practice. Individuals develop a sense of unity from their association with a

particular group(s), and publically express the common traits of their social group(s).[57]

For instance, the intra-cultural dialect and speech patterns of Africana people in the

United States (African American Vernacular English/Ebonics) are perceived as indicators

of in-group status. Africana people without a tonal similarity to the expectations and

assumptions of commonly accepted Black speech patterns are questioned about their

social group authenticity. They may receive comments from those who wish to locate

their social position such as *"you sound like you're from the north/south/not from here"*

or "you talk like a white person." An Africana person can have their social identity

validated when others affirm their common language, or the multitude of other indicators

of group membership.

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[56] Chit Cheung Matthew Sung, "Identity." In *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*, edited by Mary Kosut, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012): 174.
    [57] Ibid.

People maneuver in the discursive location of the 'everyday,' by using both "discursive and material resources"[58] to perform their identity. Stuart Hall claims that "identity is a 'production;' it is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation."[59] To understand the nature of identity, it can be classified as *performance*. Performance is "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."[60] The performance of everyday life is a collective of repeated actions drawn from unconscious and conscious social training. Actions such as waving goodbye, talking to people over the telephone, and listening quietly at public presentations involve performers carrying out acts and audiences (or co-participants) evaluating the authenticity of the performance based on others they have experienced. The resource used to perform an individual's identity is often cultivated from their culture, such as certain behaviors, dress, speech, etc. Most people are not paying attention to how they perform certain aspects of their identity; they think their behaviors feel natural and normal.[61]

"The presence of [EDMs of Black womanhood] creates an environment in which performing Black womanhood grates against the distorted images of the dominant culture."[62] Stereotypes, not in real life experiences, often provide "audience members" the criteria of how they should judge an Africana woman's performance of Black womanhood. Because several representations of Africana women in mainstream media

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[58] Ibid., 175.
[59] Hall qtd in Joy L. Lei, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 159.
[60] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle Edition.
[61] Sarah Susannah Willie, *Acting Black College, Identity, and the Performance of Race*, 128.
[62] Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body. *Hypatia* 18 (April 2003): 89.

exaggerate, debase, and/or delimit Africana women's expressions, Africana women's actual self-defined performances are perceived as inauthentic. Africana women are doubted when they portray an identity that does not conform to mainstream societal expectations. They are expected to yield to the authority of externally defined myths over their own cultural and personal contexts as the standard from which they develop and perform their identity. In Amy Wilkins study demonstrating the function of interracial stories of Black women, she finds that Black women have feelings of discomfort or inauthenticity when they are in environments where they are expected to perform other's beliefs of their identity. In reference to assumptions about Africana women's communication style, "outspoken [Africana women] felt burdened by the expectation that they will always 'speak their minds'" and others felt they "don't have a right to say anything."[63]

Collins asserts, "Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating [their] own internally defined images of self as African American women with [their] objectification as the Other."[64] Africana women are often seen as the negative reflections of white men, white women, and at times, Black men. Stereotypes reinforce that Africana women are "not a legitimate signifier" of humanity, womanhood, or blackness. Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire offer a representation that implies that Africana women are submissive, unattractive, hypersexual, irrational, mannish, "in ways that suggest that they are inferior."[65] As a mechanism for survival,

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[63] Amy Wilkins, "Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2012): 173-196.

[64] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 110.

[65] E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity.* 72.

Africana women may 'shift' their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, to serve and satisfy others. They perceive that reproducing behaviors and norms that cater to maintaining the dichotomy between the privileged and the oppressed offers some immediate benefits, such as job promotions or better grades. [66] Gender theorist Judith Butler argues that identifying with most social identities is an "ambivalent process…Under contemporary regimes of power, identifying with a race and gender involves identifying with sets of norms that are and are not realizable." [67] Even while Africana women may struggle in order to perform an "approximation of a norm" that supports Africana women's oppression, their acquiescence may hinder their ability to perform other identities.

Africana women's identity is "political -it has a direct relationship to power and resources." [68] To self-identify as a Black woman and perform Black womanhood in an anti-Black world is a political action. It is an active resistance to the dominant narrative about Black womanhood. [69] Recording artist Erykah Badu states, "I think everything we do in America as Black women or as Black people is a political statement. We're making a political statement when we're wearing an afro or locks. We're being who we are, especially in a society that does not encourage that part of our beauty." [70] To affirm their creative capacity to produce their own identities, Africana women have to perform their identity in ways that transgress the EDMs of Black womanhood.

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[66] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 7.

[67] Judith Butler Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 126.

[68] Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory (un)becoming the Subject*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 2.

[69] Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory (un)becoming the Subject*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7.

[70] Tre'vell Anderson, "BET Experience 2015: Erykah Badu, Janelle Monáe Talk Black Hair, Hip-hop." *Los Angeles Times*. June 28, 2015. Accessed October 10, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-erykah-badu-janelle-monae-bet-experience-20150628-story.html.

STRUGGLING AGAINST STEREOTYPES

EDMs of Black womanhood have been presumed detrimental to the psychological and physical well-being of Africana women and their communities. In response, a substantial amount of scholarship has been conducted to detail how Africana women react to the effects of controlling images.

Some Africana women respond to other's perception of them as stereotypes, by distancing themselves from their negative characteristics, and, at times, by playing a part in casting those who do act similar to stereotypes as deviant or abnormal. In "Unnecessary Toughness?: Those "Loud Black Girls" and Those "Quiet Asian Boys,"" Education scholar Joy Lei interviewed teachers and students at a high school to gauge their opinions about the behavior of two populations: Africana female students and Asian American male students. She found that due to their treatment at school, Africana girls behaved in ways that conformed to societal norms, and then blamed their peers for perpetuating stereotypes. In the study, Ariel, an African American female senior, was formerly "a loud Black girl" who learned how to *code-switch*.[71] She mentions that she "had to kind of mature over the years,"[72] which meant she became less loud. Her transformation shifted her view of loudness, and currently, she speaks negatively about those "loud Black girls." Ariel remarks, "*now* I look at [loud Black girls] it's like they just so dang ol' loud. And I don't know the reason for it but it just don't look right, it's not

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[71] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 108.
"shifting between dialects, languages, and styles of communication in order to meet the conflicting codes, demands, and expectations of different groups"
[72] Joy L. Lei, "(Un)necessary Toughness?: Those 'Loud Black Girls' and those 'Quiet Asian Boys.' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2003): 168.

cute."[73] Ariel's choices of identity performance have been impeded by the oppressive environment that punishes and harasses Africana girls for performing an identity that is culturally sanctioned in their communities. Consequently, Ariel and other Africana women fall into a problematic position where they reject the speech patterns of people who hold similar identity markers, and therefore, by association, they support their own oppression.

Africana women also distance themselves from stereotypes as a strategy to survive. They are performing characteristics that appear to be the opposite of some EDMs of Black womanhood, i.e. avoiding mentorship relationships with younger colleagues to avoid appearing too nurturing like a Mammy. Yet, these opposite performances may hurt their chances for other types of advancement that are available to other groups. Wendy Reynolds-Dobbs, Kecia M. Thomas, and Matthew S. Harrison' performed an examination of emerging research about the influence of stereotypes on Africana women's career development. They explained the various actions Africana women might take to escape their association with stereotypes, and how those actions serve to reduce these women's career and position opportunities. Africana women, who are afraid of being seen in their workplace as Jezebels, may avoid contact with male supervisors and co-workers. Yet these male colleagues may provide mentoring and networking contacts that would benefit Africana women in their career goals. Because they are avoiding presumptions of hypersexuality and immoral behavior, Africana women do not take

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[73] Joy L. Lei, "(Un)necessary Toughness?: Those 'Loud Black Girls' and those 'Quiet Asian Boys.' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2003): 168.

advantage of these types of relationships.[74] Africana women, who are avoiding being considered a Sapphire, may act soft-spoken, or avoid speaking in their organizations. "Black women may not be viewed as leaders in their efforts to reduce the chance of others viewing them as threatening or confrontational."[75] Unfortunately, when Africana women perform behaviors that are the opposite of stereotypes, the performance may support other myths of Africana women's inferiority and inhumanity.

By policing their own identity performances, Africana women give in to the assumption that Africana people are not human enough to possess the range of human characteristics. In a brief case study, Wendy Ashley proposed addressing a client's psychological distress with sessions that included a discussion of the "Angry Black woman" stereotype. The client had a history of sexual abuse in her childhood and sexual harassment at her workplace that had caused her to take a leave of absence. In the intake session, Ashley comments that her client did not have observable emotional response when speaking about her sexual abuse.[76] "Although anger is an appropriate response to trauma, the client internalized her anger as a characterological defect."[77] With therapy sessions that addressed not only her trauma but also her relationship to stereotypes, Ashley was able to assist her client.

Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden's *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* is another study that details various ways in which African American

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[74] Reynolds-Dobbs, Wendy, Kecia M. Thomas and Matthew S. Harrison. "From Mammy to Superwoman: Images That Hinder Black Women's Career Development." *Journal of Career Development* 35, no. 2. (December 2008): 140.
[75] Ibid., 142.
[76] Wendy Ashley, "The Angry Black Woman: The Impact of Pejorative Stereotypes on Psychotherapy with Black Women," *Social Work in Public Health* 29, no. 1 (2014): 31.
[77] Ibid., 33.

women adjust their identity performance to conform to expectations of others in spaces such as their workplace, or their homes. Jones and Shorter-Gooden conducted focus groups with 71 Africana women, and they found that their participants responded to the negative perceptions others held of Africana women by *shifting*, "moving between the presentation of their self and the presentation of an "other."[78] When they shift, "Africana women hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community."[79] The practice of shifting itself, may take a toll on Africana women. To accommodate to the needs of multiple parties, Africana women may develop destructive habits such as overeating, abusing drugs or alcohol, or finding themselves with undiagnosed cases of depression or other health and mental issues. Annette, a teacher at a community college and a devoted daughter, used food to compensate for the stress she was under taking care of the students at her college as well as her ailing parents and grandparents. "To see her in action, promptly arriving each morning in a stylish pantsuit, patiently listening to her students' questions, smiling at everyone she passed in the halls, you would never suspect how overburdened she truly was."[80]

An often-mentioned strategy to combat stereotypes is promoting a healthy self-image. Some Africana women, who are aware of the influence of stereotypes, believe that in spite of EDMs, they have positive attributes. They claim aspects of themselves that may not be considered worthy in mainstream society, such as their hair, body shape, and personality. In defiance of internalizing stereotypes as evil, they encourage a discourse of

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[78] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle Edition.

[79] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 7.

[80] Ibid., 134.

love and care for themselves. In "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women,"

Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker, and Denada Hoxha conducted focus groups

with African American girls and women between the ages of 15-21 to examine how their

participants understood aspects of their social identity. They concluded that the

intersection of race and gender had more impact on Africana women than race or gender

alone. In their research, they found that stereotypes were a dominant factor as to how

Africana women perceived of themselves. Thirty-five percent of responses to the

question "what does it mean to be African American?" reflected the effects stereotypes

have on Africana people's success and self-esteem. One of the respondents, Shawntrice

comments,

> *I think Black women or Black young women our age have a lot of*
> *stereotypes that gets them like you know...like we've said before 'she's*
> *probably promiscuous' or 'she probably can't speak that well' or 'she's*
> *gotta wear all these little like, ghetto, ghetto...'*[81]

Their respondents mention that negative perceptions of Africana women caused

them to resist their domination by having an outlook of "proving them wrong" or "an

uncritical positive self-image." Nineteen-year-old Diamond remarks that by society

standards, Black women are not beautiful. Her solution is for Black women "to know that

you know inside that that you are beautiful just the way you are" [sic].[82] Another

respondent, fifteen year old Jasmine explains that society does not presume that Africana

women will accomplish as much as their white counterparts will. She expresses her

distaste with the idea that she is inherently inferior to a "white girl." She conveys

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[81] Anita Jones Thomas, Jason Daniel Hacker, and Denada Hoxha. "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women." *Sex Roles* 64 (2011): 535.
[82] Ibid., 537.

confidence as defense against these assumptions about her abilities, by stating, "I like to prove that I can be as good as them."[83] In *Shifting,* Jones and Shorter-Gooden described various practices that Africana women performed to indicate their positive self-images. Some wore 'natural' hairstyles that did not require processing or straightening one's hair. Others commented that they loved themselves and/or their blackness.

> *Syrah, a 30-year-old logistics manager from Georgia, says, "I love my complexion; I think I'm a beautiful brown. I love my 'stereotypical' Black woman figure. I'm a size 16, and even though I want to lose weight, I only want to get back down to a 12 or 14. To go any lower would eliminate my Black woman's glory on the top and bottom.[84]*

In Marsha Houston's study of Africana women's description of their speech patterns, she found that Africana women more often than not celebrated their language.[85] Some of her participants felt that their language was "accommodating both the ethnic and dominant cultures." The majority, however, felt their language was a representation of their ethics, personal identity, culture, and politics. One respondent stated "[Black women's talk is the talk of] a strong woman with a lot of pride in who she is and what she believes in."[86] Africana women combat negative stereotypes from a positive psychology approach. These Africana women claim a positive self-image, in spite of outsider opinions.

Jones and Gooden also noticed that Africana women had many strategies that required an external change that allowed them to resist the effects of stereotypes. They

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[83] Ibid., 537.

[84] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 201.

[85] Marsha Houston, "Multiple Perspectives: African American Women Conceive Their Talk" *Women and Language* 23, no. 1 (2002):11-17.

[86] Ibid., 14.

changed their environment through the legal system, or relocation, in order to present themselves authentically. After racist and/or sexist encounters in the workplace, Africana women have employed legal action to fight workplace discrimination. They have also switched jobs and moved to another workplace that takes pride in diversity.[87] Liz, a lawyer, left practicing law after 20 years of performing an acceptable Black womanhood for law firms. She was continually overlooked as her White and male colleagues made partner. She became a professor of law at a small liberal arts college. She remarks that in her previous job, she felt isolated. "I think that's why I felt so uncomfortable because I didn't see anywhere where I could be whole."[88]

Aimee Cox study, "Thugs, Black Divas, and Gendered Aspirations," offers a nuanced example of Africana women using their identity performance to resist oppression by stereotypes by influencing how others perceived them. She conducted a five-year ethnographic study on the shifting gender performances of young low-income African American women in a Detroit, MI homeless shelter. She determined that the young Black women altered their gender performances in order to gain power, respect, and resources from non-profit workers, employees in welfare offices, and other young Black women. Her subjects who initially appeared and conceived of themselves performing a type of Black womanhood, felt that they were not receiving fair treatment or certain resources because of other's belief in racial and gender stereotypes. When participants signed up to receive job training, an unofficial tracking system placed

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[87] Ibid., 280.
[88] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 173.

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"females into the nursing and clerical vocations and males into carpentry, engineering, construction, and computer repair."[89] Since women were not tracked into 'male' jobs, they did not have access to careers that would make more than minimum wage.

Respect was a more salient issue to these women than income. The staff at the homeless shelter, and other non-profit and government workers expected Africana women to gain respect through their presentation of respectable Black womanhood. In her study, Cox claims that respectability was tied to expressions of sexuality. To staff, the young Black women who wanted to succeed were the ones who did not exhibit sexual behaviors; however, expressions of sexuality, such as having multiple boyfriends who provided them with material and emotional support, was considered a marker of status within the group. Over the course of a few years, the young Africana women who had predominately appeared to perform the trope of femininity shifted their gender performances – this shift was expressed by a change of behaviors, dress, and sexuality. They wore "oversized clothes, had close-cropped or unstyled hair, a "hard" demeanor, and appeared to be attracted to women. In performing a more "masculine" identity, these women garnered respect and deference from staff, government workers, other young women, and male sexual partners. Some were able to be trained in the "masculine" careers, and were able to earn higher wages than their more feminine counterparts were. By not being perceived as 'stereotypical' Africana women, they were exempt from those Black women specific oppressive practices. The women at the homeless shelter

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[89] Aimee Cox, "Thugs, Black Divas, and Gendered Aspirations." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 11, no. 2 (2009): 136.

challenged stereotypes by disrupting gender categories, and "their response to oppression can be seen as transformative work."[90]

From looking over the literature of Africana women's identity construction in stereotype-filled environments, there is a predominance of scholarly inquiry that focuses on their rejection of stereotypes. Researchers often demonstrate that when Africana women perform an identity that is counter to the stereotypes, they may re-victimize themselves, or they assume that those who appear to be performing the stereotypes deserve society's negative treatment. In these studies, stereotypes appear omnipotent, and the Africana agency of Africana women remains severely underrepresented. There are a few studies that acknowledge how Africana women affect their circumstances, even in small, localized ways, for the betterment of themselves and their communities. As a scholar of Black women phenomena, I am not dismissing the importance of acknowledging the multiple levels of oppression caused by stereotypes; however, this field of research is becoming one-sided in favor of oppression studies.

In my study of Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe identity performances, my objective is to focus on how these two Africana women operate their agency to challenge stereotypes. I am directing the analysis toward "Black [women] who reject Black woman stereotypes that exist in the popular imagination"[91] and place attention on their culturally relevant and revolutionary expressions of Black womanhood. I attempt to develop a discourse that assumes that there exists a "world of Black [women] who resist and revolt,

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[90] Ibid., 137.
[91] bell hooks, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics,* 97.

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intervene and transform, rescue and recover"[92] in order to interrogate how they behave as catalysts of Africana cultural change.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to establish the Africana Studies, Afrocentricity, and Afrofuturism aspects of a research inquiry about Africana women that addresses the history of their both oppression and their agency. In the chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical perspective of Afrofuturism, and then I propose a hacked definition of Afrofuturism that I use as a primary perspective for my study. This Afrofuturism examines Africana people's phenomena using an Africana technocultural perspective and sustains Africana agency at the center of discourse. A hacked Afrofuturism acknowledges the history of speculation and technological literacy present in Africana social and political thought. Overall, it adds a Black technoculture dimension to Africana Studies' overall mission to cultivate a self-determined reality for Africana people"[93] and eliminates mechanisms that (re)produce Africana people's domination.

Additionally, I explain my choice of Location Theory as the method in which to examine the 'cultural addresses' of Truth and Monáe. In this section, I assert that Africana people have a technological agency that can be explained through the enduring veneration of the Yoruba deity, Ogun. Rituals to honor Ogun double as pedagogical tools that teach Africana people how technology functions from within their worldview. Location Theory assists in uncovering symbols embedded in the performance texts of

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[92] ibid.
[93] Norment, "Introduction," xxvii – xli.

Truth and Monáe's performance texts to provide the evidence that will show that their identity performances function as liberation technologies.

Chapter 3 begins with an examination of the images of Black women in public media during the mid to late 19th century, followed by a biography of Sojourner Truth and a literature review that examines the scholarship on Sojourner Truth's use of her image. Then, I conduct a Location Theory analysis of Truth's performance texts, such as her cartes-de-visite, and the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Her performance texts indicate that Truth manipulated her representation to provide an alternative interpretation of Black womanhood for both white and Black audiences. In photographs and her transcribed autobiography, she meticulously directed how others would perceive her and her version of Black womanhood. I argue that Truth's transition from Isabella to Sojourner Truth demonstrates her repossessing the ability to 'hack' her identity. After years experiencing the consequences of others mythologizing her body and story, she generates the mythical figure *Sojourner Truth*, as a means to struggle against EDMs of Black womanhood. Over time, she becomes an archetype that challenges how Black womanhood is read.

Chapter 4 parallels the structure of the previous chapter, but the analysis comprises the history of Janelle Monáe, her management of identity, and how her identity performances are liberation technologies. Chapter 4 includes a concise literature review about three Africana women who embody new constructions of Black womanhood that affect Black women in the 2004-2014 period that Monáe has been active. The chapter also contains a review of how scholars interpret Monáe's identity performance. In the last section of the chapter, I assert that Monáe uses her clothing and her folktale to make performing a non-stereotypical Black womanhood accessible to Africana women. She

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appears in her music videos, interviews, and concerts in a visual style reminiscent of a superhero character. In response, her audience can wear Monáe's identity, like cosplay – a performative action in which an individual dons a costume to generate an association between themselves and the "parent text" being referenced; the parent text is often science fiction and fantasy characters from shows, comics, and films such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *the Avengers*. Monáe's cosplayers identify with attributes of her extraordinary and memorable characters, therefore, when they wear them, they are performing Monáe's brand of a revolutionary Black womanhood.

In Chapter 5, I provide a final discussion on Truth and Monáe's instrumentation of their identity and suggest areas for future research. Two areas I specify are interrogating how "regular" Black women employ their identity performances as liberation technologies, and examining other ways to implement Afrofuturism methodologies within the discipline of Africana Studies.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

In this dissertation, I add to the scholarship of Africana women's praxes instead of adding to studies of Africana women's oppression. Therefore, in my interrogation of Africana women's reaction to the myths of Black womanhood, I am not examining the negative effects of stereotypes on Black women, nor the stereotypical behaviors that women perform in order to survive in an anti-Black woman world. Instead, I aim to study those Black women who negotiate their identity with the aim to resist stereotypes. From that location, I want to identify Africana women's strategies and tactics for forming identities that transgress[94] externally defined myths of Black womanhood. I propose that these methods develop Africana identity performances that exist independently from oppressive constructs, and liberate other Black women from the burden caused by the prevalence of EDMs in media and other social institutions.

In order to stay consistent with my aims to focus on African agency, liberation, and the destruction of white supremacy, I position my dissertation as a work of Africana Studies and Afrocentricity.

METHODOLGY

Setting the stage: Africana Studies

Africana Studies is the critical and systematic study of Africana people and phenomena that establishes Africana people as agents and subjects of their experiences.[95]

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[94] Layli Phillips and Marla R. Stewart, "'I am just so glad you are alive': New Perspectives on Non-Traditional, Non-conforming, and Transgressive Expressions of Gender, Sexuality, and Race among African Americans." *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 4 (2008): 380. "[to transgress] is [to] purposefully confront and contest mainstream conventions using expressions of gender, sexuality, or race as part of a larger political agenda for social change."

[95] Nathaniel Norment, "Introduction" in The African American Studies Reader 2nd edition, ed.

While the foundations of the discipline can be traced to the intellectual tradition of

Ancient Kemet (Egypt) and Nubia peoples of studying themselves and the world around

them[96], the institutionalization of the discipline in the Western academy resulted from

Africana students' demands for culturally relevant education. During the 1960s and

1970s, more Africana students attended predominately white colleges and universities

than in previous decades, especially after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Higher

Education Act.[97] Moreover, many of these Africana students, who were influenced by the

Black Power Movement that called for self-determination and cultural pride, begin to

realize that the education they received at white institutions lacked relevant and accurate

information about Africana people and history. In their frustration, they demanded that

their universities develop "courses, curricula, and programs representing the totality of

African American history and culture, and hire Black faculty."[98] Africana Studies as it is

known contemporarily, developed from this student-driven movement.

In developing the mission of the discipline, the founders of Africana Studies

"sought to include the struggle for academic freedom and justice that was taking place in

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Nathaniel Norment (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), xxviii, xxxiii. Maulana Karenga, "Black Studies." In Encyclopedia of Black Studies, eds. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 149-52. and Molefi Asante, "Africology: Naming an Intellectual Enterprise in our Field." Molefi Kete Asante Website. Accessed June 30, 2014. http://www.asante.net/articles/3/africology-naming-an-intellectual-enterprise-in-our-field/

[96] Maulana Karenga, "Black Studies." in *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, Edited by Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 149.

[97] Ibram X. Kendi *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 27.

"The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination in higher education, among other areas of society, and gave government agencies the power to withhold federal money from programs or institutions that were sites of discrimination…The Higher Education Act provided financial assistance for millions of aspiring college students, and it increased federal money given to colleges and universities, some of which was used to create programs to recruit Black students."

[98] Nathaniel Norment, Jr., *The African American Studies Reader*, xxxi.

the university, into the general struggle for social freedom and justice that was happening

outside of academic spaces."[99] Since then, Africana Studies has had a strong commitment

for its faculty and students to engage in social change projects both within and outside the

academy. Its most pertinent concern, however, has been to rectify the damage that

European/American oppressive systems have inflicted upon the study of the history,

social conditions, and psychology of Africana people. In *Black Skin, White Masks,*

psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon explains that "the European or white

civilization assumes Africana people are the objectified racial other of white history.

White philosophy removes African people from existing as the subjects or agents of

history."[100] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, one of the founders of modern western

philosophy, claimed that "[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement

or development to exhibit." He attributes the historical events that developed inside the

African continent to European and Asian civilizations, and he distances Egypt from

African civilization when he states, "[Egypt] does not belong to the African Spirit."[101]

The European perspective of Africans "distorts their historical being and consciousness

and designates it as false or pathological."[102] In response to Europeans actively

destroying Africana history, Africana Studies contributes scholarship with which to

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[99] Maulana Karenga, *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, 150.
[100] Anthony Monteiro, "The Epistemic Crisis of African American Studies: A Du Boisian Resolution " *Socialism an Democracy* 25 no, 1 (2011), 205-6.
[101] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 99.
[102] Anthony Monteiro, "The Epistemic Crisis of African American Studies: A Du Boisian Resolution " *Socialism an Democracy* 25 no, 1 (2011), 196.

"reverse the systematic invasion and transformation of the history and culture of Africana people by European through channels such as technology, education, and media.[103]

Over the last 50 years, Africana Studies has used historical and social contexts to interrogate phenomena that affect the masses of Africana people, such as poverty and police brutality. To accomplish this, the discipline has a *sankofic* orientation -it recognizes and embraces past practices and methods from the long expanse of Africana history and brings them forward for present and future adoption and adaptation. [104] Africana Studies has served to "recover and develop methodologies, theories, paradigms, and products that cultivate a self-determined reality for Africana people."[105] "The most challenging task for Africana Studies in the future is to successfully produce and transmit knowledge for the Black population that will lead to the elimination of mechanisms that (re)produce the domination of Africana people."[106]

Afrocentricity

Afrocentricity is a way to approach knowledge and knowledge construction that privileges Africana experiences, intelligence, and manifestations. It is the process by which a scholar locates or relocates the African individual, content, or agency "within the center of any analysis of African phenomena."[107] The Afrocentricity perspective is used

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[103] Maulana Karenga, "Black Studies and the Problematic of Paradigm" *African American Studies Reader.* 2nd edition. ed. Nathaniel Norment, Jr. (Durham, NC. Carolina Press. 2007), 356-368.

[104] Shantrelle Lewis, "Dandy Lion: Articulating a Re(De)fined Black Masculine Identity." 2011. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://issuu.com/aljiracontemporaryart/docs/dandy_lion_catlg.

[105] Nathaniel Norment Jr., *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), xxvii – xli.

[106] James Stewart, "Black Studies and Black People in the Future," *Black Books Bulletin* 4 (1976): 21.

[107] Molefi Kete Asante, "Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity" *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13 (2002): 97; Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 2.

as a meta-methodology with which to analyze the discipline. It has fueled the "reexamining of all aspects of the African experience," thereby influencing the scope and design of Africana Studies curricula and institutions.[108] It encourages the removal of problematic European concepts and methods that contradict the discipline's mission of cultural grounding, academic excellence, and social responsibility. Afrocentricity challenges the domination of white supremacist thought in both academia as well as mainstream cultural discourse, and argues that the myths of Africana intellectual inferiority and historical absence are mechanisms in which to keep Africana people oppressed.

Africologist Molefi Kete Asante, the creator of Afrocentricity, argues that European thought, "has seldom considered the possibilities of other realities, or indeed shared realities."[109] The tradition of European thought that has existed since the Enlightenment has been fiercely advocated as a universal perspective, although in reality, it is a provincial view of the world.

The French philosopher Rene Descartes asserted that his existence is substantiated by his ability to think. This is summed up by his well-known phrase, *cogito ergo sum,* - I think, therefore I am. Two problems with Cartesian logic are that it is an anthropocentric idea that defines European "man as the only entity endowed with reason"[110] and that Descartes' proposition becomes the basic premise for much of Western philosophy and

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[108] Nathaniel Norment Jr., *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), xxxix.

[109] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Rev. and Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998)*,* 3.

[110] Stacy Alaimo qtd in Gregory Jerome Hampton, "*Wildseed*: The Paradox of Bodily Inscription" in *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 32.

science. Because of Cartesian logic, the myths of objectivity and universality dominate the landscape of empirical research and scholarly discourse.[111] "Objectivity" is an example of the reification of 18th century European male thought,"[112] therefore to engage in objective research, is to perform as an imperialist, emotionally detached, disembodied person. Marimba Ani explains that the process of objectivity involves

> *The researcher disengaging himself from what he wishes to know and by doing this, he makes what he wishes to know into an object. The object has been created by the distance of the knowing self from the thing to be known.[113]*

Objectivity assumes that if the researcher is impartial, then their questions and conclusions could become universal; however, it is an assumption of Western philosophy that one can remove oneself from influencing one's inquiry. As a result, to sustain the myth that being objective is the only "fair" way to produce knowledge, Europeans had to convince most of the world that what European man observed is observed by all, and therefore, it is the correct way to understand the world. As this perspective of scientific study became the foundation for creating modern institutions of higher education, the unquestioned attribute of 'thinking like a white person' proliferated into most fields of study.

Africana people gained access to the European-based academy, and they were trained to approach research objectively. From this training, they developed a type of *double consciousness*, whereby, they simultaneously saw the world from the perspective

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[111] Kariamu Welsh-Asante, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 2.

[112] Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "The Politics of Black Women's Studies." In *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr., (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), 192.

[113] Dona Richards (Mariba Ani) qtd in Karanja Keita Carroll,. "Africana Studies and Research Methodology: Revisiting the Centrality of the Afrikan Worldview." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 2 (March 2008): 4-27.

of the western intellectual tradition and as Africana individuals. This resulted in many

Africana scholars attempting to fulfill two (often competing) research goals. The focus of

their research may be Africana people, but the scientific assumptions were from

European perspectives. They aimed to increase knowledge about Africana people, but the

results of their research reinforced oppression. Patricia Hill Collins remarked,

> *"Early Black women scholars adhered to Eurocentric masculinist epistemologies so that their work would be accepted as scholarly. As a result, they may have produced [what they considered] Black feminist thought, but it was not from an Afrocentric feminist epistemology.*[114]

During the 1960s struggle for African cultural relevance in tertiary education,

Africana students challenged having to learn about themselves and their culture from a

perspective that considered Africana people inhuman and second-class citizens; early

Africana Studies scholars questioned if the practice of "objectivity," was oppressive, if

objectivity was just European subjectivity. These criticisms about the nature of the

Western academic tradition encouraged the creation of new methodologies in which to

conduct research that assumed the humanity of Africana people.

In the late 1970s, Molefi Kete Asante created Afrocentricity as a response to the

assumption of the academy that the European perspective is universal. He "conceived of

Afrocentricity as a way to provide a fuller, rounded, theoretical construction of what was

being called 'the Black perspective'"[115] Asante defined Afrocentricity as an approach to

the study of Africana people, that "literally plac[es] African ideals at the center of any

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[114] Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" *Turning the Tide*. 2009. Accessed September 1, 2015.

[115] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 6.

analysis that involves African culture and behavior."[116] Afrocentricity "views the

perspective of the African ... [such that African] people, concepts, and history [are

studied] from an African world view."[117] Worldview is the collection of "concepts such

as cosmology, ontology, axiology, epistemology, and other philosophical assumptions of

a culture group in which a people make sense of reality."[118] Afrocentricity was a simple

premise; however, it was revolutionary because it approached research from the

perspective of the African, which contradicted the belief of the supremacy of Western

thought. Research, as its foundation is privileged European patriarchal thought, "has been

used as a tool of domination." [119] The presence of Afrocentricity in the academy has led

to "rendering research activity as a basic human right and a process of liberation for

oppressed groups."[120]

An important practice of Afrocentric scholars is to (re)locate Africana people

from being "objects in the margins of European experiences…to being subjects of

historical and social experiences."[121] Subjects have a human characteristic; they act upon

objects, whereas objects are acted upon.[122] Afrocentricity scholars who classify Africana

people as subjects challenge the assumption that European objectivity is the best method

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[116] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 6.

[117] Molefi Kete Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education." *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): 171.

[118] Karanja Keita Carroll, "An Introduction to African-Centered Sociology: Worldview, Epistemology, and Social Theory." *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 2 (March 2014): 263.

[119] Filomina Chioma Steady, *"African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective." Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 4.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 15; D. Zizwe Poe, *Kwame Nkrumah's Contribution to Pan-Africanism an Afrocentric Analysis,* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

[122] Alyssa MacKinnon, "Sexual subject vs. sexual object." *University Wire.* February 18, 2015.

in which to study Africana people. "Too often the discussion of African phenomena has moved on the basis of what Europeans think and say in relation to the phenomena rather that what the African themselves are saying and doing."[123] Afrocentricity unsettles the academy's allegiance to the universality of European thought by asserting its alternative perspective in which to gather and create knowledge.

Asante affirms that it is the scholar's imperative to position the African as "the principal player or actor within his or her world;"[124] they must recognize Africana agency in their study of Africana people, experiences, and phenomena. *Agency* is an individual's ability and capacity to generate their own cultural and personal reality "for the advancement of human freedom."[125] It "indicates that an individual has presence, will and movement; they can move freely as a human being." [126] Africana people are agents -- "human beings who are capable of acting independently in their best interest."[127] The work of redressing the lack of Africana agents in modern conceptualizations of world history and culture contributes much to the development of the theoretical foundation of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism centers its analysis and subject of interest on the speculation and 'technological endeavors of Africana people, and challenges the dystopic imaginings of Europeans that distanced Africana people from their own futures. As Afrofuturism is an endeavor to affirm the existence of technological agency and speculative drive of Africana people, it first must be established that Africana people possess a unique and

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[123] Ibid., 42.
[124] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*, 40.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 177-178.
[127] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*, 40.

self-sustaining worldview, and they act to improve and maintain it. Afrocentricity provides those basic assumptions for which the Afrofuturist perspective can build methodologies and concepts about specific aspects of the Africana experience.

Afrofuturism

"Beginning in the 1940s, automation began to replace mechanization, as the electronic or computerized element replaced humans in the production process."[128] In response to these changes in technology, theorists speculated that automation would surpass mechanization as the next stage of human development. As people are growing more dependent upon computers, wireless technologies, and the internet to control ever-larger segments of their lives such as communication, commerce, governance, work, and leisure, the "future" is being defined by the presence of digital technologies. [129]

This shift from the industrial age to the digital age has also altered the discourse on what defines a human. When mechanization was the future, theorists saw the body as a salient element of humanity and asserted that the choice to sell one's labor categorized humanity into classes of people. Those who were forced to sell their labor were a lower class, and those who did not have to sell, an upper class. Digital technologies have initiated alternative theories about the humanity and the construction of society. They also generated questions regarding the relationship between humans and their physical forms. One of the questions of digital theorists was whether humanity could be human without corporal forms? For many, freedom from the body was a liberating concept;

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[128] Ibram Rogers, "The Black Campus Movement: An Afrocentric Narrative History of the Struggle to Diversify Higher Education, 1965-1972." (dissertation, Temple University, 2009), 38.

[129] Nelson, Alonda. "Digital Culture," *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*. ed. Colin Palmer, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2006), 619.

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however, their identifying freedom from the body as an element of future humans, produces a caste system that bases human value on who has access to avatar producing technologies, and who has the ability to abandon their corporality.

The digital age and its accompanying technologies have made many people hopeful about the future. Information about global issues, cultural phenomena, scientific discoveries, etc. from different parts of the world is accessible through communication technologies. In theory, people are able to solve problems or learn new ideas by tapping into the omnipresent network of computing devices sustained by a global community. Yet, the digital age carries the same problems with discrimination and prejudice as the eras proceeding it. The presence of digital technologies has not erased the various oppressive forces that includes some people in the future categorization of humanity, while leaving others behind. Limiting access to technology remains a tool that is used to dominate Africana people and suppress their social development.

The *digital divide* is a "popular shorthand used to describe the myriad of social and cultural factors that shape access to technological resources; it has become a code word for the technological inequities that exist between blacks and whites."[130] In the 1990s, the computer was becoming a required resource in everyday life. It was turning out to be that to function to modern society would require, at minimum, an exposure to computing technologies. This impending situation leads to the notion that those without computer knowledge would be left behind the rest of humanity. The digital divide began

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[130] Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text* 71 (Summer 2002): 1; Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines, eds., *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1.

the conversation that due to the long history of segregation and impoverishment, Africana people did not have an equal access to computers as white people. Scholars and analysts publicized the dearth of Africana people with computers in the home, in their workplace, and in their schools, as well as the low number of Africana people who used the internet. It was also shown that few Africana people held careers in computer science and engineering. These disparities were a result of the economic and education discriminations that have plagued Africana people's abilities to acquire better paying jobs and access better education. It was predicted that the divide would only widen unless these issues were solved.

Twenty years later, the term digital divide has fallen out of popularity; however, there remains a gap between Africana people and whites in term of access to certain aspects of technological education. There is still a significant lack of resources in schools which Africana children attend, which results in inadequate preparation for STEAM[131] fields at the elementary and middle school levels. Additionally, Africana children have a lack of mentorship, because Africana people only hold 4.6% of jobs, and 6.8% of degrees in science and technology.[132] Despite these statistics, the usage of technology is high in the Africana community. Africana people either are on par or surpass their white counterparts in terms of cellphone ownership and social media usage. The phenomena of Black Twitter especially shows that in the digital era there is a thriving Africana technoculture - "an Africana sociality defined by its use of human-made creations and

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[131] Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics

[132] "Science and Engineering Labor Force," *Science and Engineering Indicators 2014.* February 1, 2014. Accessed October 8, 2015. http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind14/index.cfm/chapter-3.

skills [technology and technique] that inform its corresponding signs, grammars and practices."[133] Black people have always affirmed their technological creativity based upon their Africana cosmological systems- a fact that can be seen in the many science and technology inventors, such as George Washington Carver, Madame CJ Walker, Mary Moore, Charles Drew, and Patricia Bath, who used technology to aid Black people.[134]

Even though there is evidence of Africana people using technology in large numbers, in American society, there persists a myth of Black technophobia. The myth depicts Africana people as fearful of technology, and since they are afraid, they do not participate in technological development. People see this narrative as a rationale explaining why Africana people lack technological skills equal to the white population. Africana people's phobia is an exaggeration and generalization; however, it is true that some Africana people are not early adopters of technological innovations. This apprehension likely originates from the history of exploitation, abuse, and death that Africana people have been subject to in the name of Western technological advancement. Eli Whitney's cotton gin increased production of cotton for southern business, but it also increased the need of the labor of enslaved individuals. "Thousands of Africans were imported to do the work; in Mississippi alone the number of slaves increased from 498 in 1784 to 195,211 by 1840."[135] The gynecological instruments that are used today were created by Marion Sims, who sexually abused enslaved African women in the name of science, in Montgomery, Alabama. "Sims inserted a pewter spoon into her vagina and

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[133] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 291n1.
[134] Alondra Nelson, *Social Text*, 6.
[135] Anthony Walton, "Technology vs. African Americans" *The Atlantic Monthly* 283, no.1, (January 1999): 17.

recounts, 'introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before.'"[136] There are many instances where Africana people were used in medical experimentations without their permission, such as in the Tuskegee Syphilis study conducted between 1932 and 1972. "The Public Health Service, a federal agency, denied Africana men with syphilis access to its cure in order to assess the disease's debilitating effects on the body."[137] The alleged fear Africana have of technology has a basis in the historical mistreatment of Africana people, although, their suspicion is limited to technology that comes from whites under the guise of assisting Africana people.

Groups with privilege assume that African people do not have a technoculture because they are not exposed to Africana people performing their technological agency. Africana people are seldom seen in scientific roles in movies and television shows, or like in horror, films have the tendency to disappear in earlier parts of the story. As I mentioned earlier, there are few Africana people who major in engineering, science, and math, or who hold advanced positions in STEAM-related businesses. The absence of visual representations of Africana technologies and technologists in the mainstream imagination makes the myth of Black technophobia seem authentic. In their position of authority as teachers, and politicians, members of privileged groups can coerce Africana people into believing they lack technical agency; subsequently, they can recruit Africana people to engage in practices that are against their own best interest.

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[136] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, 101-102.
[137] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter, 1992): 265.

Black technophobia identifies Africana people as unable to "keep pace in a hi-tech world that threatens to outstrip them."[138] Since mainstream society assumes they are not participating in technological development, Africana people are seen as a part of the past.[139] The Western philosophy of progress assumes "that humanity must move in a forward linear trajectory towards an undefined end"[140] and scientific advancement is the vehicle that drives humans ahead. In such a progress-driven society, being associated with the past is akin to social death.

In opposition to the myth of Black technophobia, scholars of Africana phenomena affirm the existence of a Black technoculture in their development of *Afrofuturism*. Afrofuturism is a term describing both the longstanding philosophy concerned with how Africana people approach technology, and the practice of African people using technology and speculation for their own benefit. The concept has been used to refute the mythology that Africana people lack technological agency and other disparaging notions in regards to Africana people's engagement with technology and/or projections about the future. It has been a perspective that "disrupted paradigms that treat blackness and technology as diametrically opposed"[141] and it "helped rationalize African American participation in digital culture."[142]

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[138] Nelson, Alondra. "AfroFuturism: Past-Future Vision," *Colorlines*, (April 30, 2000): 34.
[139] Anna Everett, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere." *Social Text* 71 (Summer 2002): 133.
[140] Karanja Keita Carroll, "Africana Studies and Research Methodology: Revisiting the Centrality of the Afrikan Worldview." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 2 (March 2008): 18.
[141] Rebecca Wanzo, "The Black Technological Sublime," in *Black Kirby Presents: In Search of the Motherboxx Connection*, (Buffalo: NY: Black Kirby Collective, 2013), 139.
[142] Cinque Hicks, "Circuit Jamming." *The International Review of African American Art 2*3, no. 23 (2011): 8.

In the early 1990s, Afrofuturism as a site of academic inquiry developed from

"scholars in art, music, and technology being intent on finding new ways to articulate

clear shifts in how Blackness and racial identity impacted culture and our engagement of

it."[143] They began to describe how similar the Africana experience was to science fiction,

or how Africana people were not major players in developing the *future industry*.[144] In

particular, Africana people created works that drew from the African American social

and political thought tradition of using technological, futuristic, and fantastic metaphors

to articulate the Africana American condition.

In the 1980s, cultural critic Greg Tate wrote articles concerning Africana music,

current events, literature, and art for periodicals such as the *Village Voice,* and *Source*

Magazine. In many of his articles, Tate examined music and literature through the

intersection of Africana culture, futuristic or speculative fiction, and/or technology. His

analytical style publicized a "sciencing" of Black culture. Through quoting rap lyrics,

citing science fiction and fantasy tropes, and conveying the wisdom of "Mama Tate,"

Tate's mix of playful banter and textbook rhetoric provides much of the language for an

academic Afrofuturism discourse before cultural theorist Mark Dery even thought of the

term Afrofuturism in 1994. For instance, in 1985, Tate wrote a book review of the Hugo

and Nebula Award winning book *Neuromancer* and gave author William Gibson credit

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[143] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 182n 238.

[144] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
Future industries are the corporations run by" technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and movie producers," that engineers the collective fantasies of human development.

for being "knowledgeable and empathetic"[145] to Rastafari culture and spirituality. In the review, Tate quotes a passage that he felt was the "most Irie passage you'll run up on in a science fiction novel,"[146] but he immediately declares, "*Neuromancer* ain't hardly about the souls of dread folk."[147] Tate used science fiction to translate Africana cultural elements, as a way to bridge the language barrier with a society that was embracing how much their science fiction was becoming reality. He positions himself as a bridge between Africana culture and the presumed "western" technoculture. Tate publicly admits that he reads science fiction, as a means to dispel certain myths of Africana people not adopting a future orientation. Moreover, he affirms that Africana thought can be used to approach science and technological phenomena in his use of Africana cultural terms and materials, such as "Irie" and Du Bois' Souls of Black Folk, and employing a writing style that mimics his New York City Africana dialect. Kodwo Eshun, a British-Ghanaian cultural critic and musician, reflects, "Tate's essays were ground breaking texts that served as a map towards discovering pathways of Black thought towards future-shock ideas."[148]

Tate supplied some of Mark Dery's initial thoughts on the formation of Afrofuturism, although, only a few sources cite his hand in its creation.[149] Eshun claims

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[145] Greg Tate, "Dread or Alive: William Gibson," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 228.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid., 228.

[148] Michael Gonzales, "What Is Afrofuturism?" *Ebony*. October 1, 2013. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/black-alt-enter-afrofuturism-999.

Other significant essays anthologized in Flyboy in the Buttermilk are "Beat the Message Too: Ramm-El-Zee vs. K-Rob," "Yo Hermeneutics: Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and David Toop" and "Ghetto in the Sky: Samuel Delany's Black Whole."

[149] Paul D. Miller, Alexander G. Weheliye, Lisa Yaszek, and Michael Gonzales to name a few.

that Dery started writing about the interplay between science fiction and Black culture

only after being exposed to Tate. "Dery, through the Greg Tate route, started doing it in

'93."[150] In knowing that Tate was his inspiration, it is not surprising to find elements of

Tate's 1992 anthology *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* in the 1993 article "Black to the Future."

Dery refers to many people, quotes, and moments that appear in *Flyboy* such as Henry

Louis Gates' concept of signifyin',[151] and the graffiti theorist RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ.[152] Even

the title of Dery's article, "Black to the Future" and the term "Afrofuturism" appears to

be an appropriation of Greg Tate's phrasing from the article "Love and the Enemy," as

much as it is a reference to Def Jef's song "Black to the Future"[153] which Dery quotes in

his epigraph. In the second to last paragraph of his essay (and of the book), Tate remarks

that Africana people should behave as if "the white man is a natural disaster," as a way to

alter how Africana people approach solving the problem of anti-Black racism. He claims

that Africana people will not achieve liberation if they continue to hope a natural disaster

will free them from white cultural domination. "These mufuhs will be living in bubble

cities and have your ass in the cold paying for air sandwiches…Later for Black to the

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[150] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction,* 175.

[151] Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America*, 147.

[152] Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America,* 94.

[153] Dery quotes the Def Jef Song in "Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0." *Mark Dery's Shovelware* [Archived]. 2004. Accessed October 2013. http://web.archive.org/web/20060506012307/http://www.markdery.com/archives/books/flame_wars_excerpts/ and in Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0." in *AfroFuturist Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fictions Newest New Wave Trajectory*. ed. Marleen S. Barr (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State Press, 2008), 8. It does not appear in the South Atlantic Quarterly or the Flame Wars versions that include interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose.

Def Jef "Black to the Future." *Just a Poet with Soul,* 1989

 "Yo, bust this, Black/ To the Future/ Back to the past/ History is a mystery 'cause it has / All the info / You need to know /Where you're from /Why'd you come and/ That'll tell you where you're going."

futurism. Your mind may be in Khmet, bro, but yo…"[154] In this passage, Tate

intermingles science fiction, Africana history, and politics as a way to examine Africana

phenomena; he establishes the rhetoric and content of a latter 20th century Afrofuturism

discourse, although his contribution remains undervalued.

The term Afrofuturism was first written by Dery in "Black to the Future:

Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" in the Fall 1993 edition

of *Southern Atlantic Quarterly*.[155] According to Dery, *Afrofuturism* is the literature,

music, and visual art by African Americans that uses science fiction language, motifs,

and clichés. It is

> *speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses*
> *African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century*
> *technoculture - and, more generally, African-American signification that*
> *appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced*
> *future.[156]*

The basis of his definition originates from observing Africana cultural productions in

comic books and by graffiti artists (brought to his attention by Tate) and comparing them

to themes of cyberpunk literature that emerged in the 1980s.[157] He saw a similarity

between Africana people creating art in impoverished conditions and cyberpunk

protagonists gathering materials in post-apocalyptic scenarios. Although he coined the

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[154] Greg Tate, "Love and the Enemy." *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 284.

[155] The article was later republished in Dery's edited work, *Flame Wars* in 1994.

[156] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[157] Kevin Featherly, "Cyberpunk," in *Encyclopedia of New Media,* ed. Steve Jones, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2003), 111.

"Cyberpunk's name contains the seeds of its meaning. The "cyber-" prefix derives from cybernetics, the science of communication and control in animal and machine, and reveals the literary movement's permeating technological underpinnings. The "-punk" suffix— borrowed from the radical, do-it-yourself rock-music movement of the late 1970s—describes the anarchistic alienation of most of the genre's main characters, usually outcasts populating a decadent, technology-dominated society."

term, Dery does not offer the best definition of Afrofuturism, nor does he provide an Afrocentric interpretation of Africana speculation and technological phenomena. His objective is to draw scholarly interest towards the Africana creative productions that remix the meaning and purpose of certain technologies, by giving them an anti-establishment edge. The primary weakness of his argument, however, is that he sustains the notion that technology is a domain of white people, and he assumes that Africana people are late bloomers in initiating any form of technological agency.

Dery begins his article by posing the question "*Why do so few African Americans write science fiction?*"[158] He mentions that he is perplexed as to the lack of Africana science fiction stories, even though, Africana peoples' historical experience in the United States resembles science fiction tropes. "African Americans are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements…"[159] He continues his line of inquiry by questioning if African Americans even have the ability to imagine their futures. He asks this because he believes that Africana people dedicate most of their resources to reclaiming a past that Europeans destroyed or revised. "[Africana people's] past has been deliberately rubbed out; [their] energy has been consumed by searching for legible traces of their history."[160] He alleges that Africana people's focus on the past severely limits their capacity to imagine the future. In addition, Dery claims that since white people have already placed themselves in future scenarios in the media, they have claimed ownership over the "unreal estate of the future. [They] engineer our collective fantasies."[161]

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[158] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* 179-180.
[159] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* 179-180.
[160] Ibid., 180.
[161] Ibid.

Ultimately, Dery goes down this road of degrading Africana cultural values, in order to make a grand reveal of his argument that Africana people have science fiction cultural productions, but they "must be sought in unlikely places."[162] Dery's process to get to that point, however, drags his reader through a rhetoric that continually negates Africana creativity in the face of oppression. While he attempts to voice that the science fiction literature of Africana people is not found in novels, but in other media such as music, comic books, and graffiti, he inadvertently supports Africana people's cultural inferiority by demonstrating their lack of particular cultural artifacts in comparison to white people. Then, he seems to assume that envisioning one's future is a luxury for those who have to reclaim their pasts, and they have neither the time nor resources to produce alternative futures that the white-backed media would publish. Moreover, Dery holds a stereotypical, one-dimensional image of blackness, i.e. Africana people are impoverished. He describes the productions of Hip Hop, which is his primary understanding of Africana culture, as part of "the alchemy of poverty that transmutes sneakers into high style, turntables into musical instruments, and spray-painted tableaux on subway cars into hit-and-run art."[163]

Dery constructs Africana people as a poor but "noble" people to fit his ideation that their entire population are cyberpunk protagonists hacking the system with the "master's tools.[164] For Dery, "Hip-hop culture retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the technocommodities and science fictions generated by dominant culture"[165] He believes that African Americans "misuse" of technocommodities (commercial electronics

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[162] Ibid., 182.

[163] Ibid., 185.

[164] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.
   "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

[165] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* 185.

like stereos, turntables, etc.) is a novel and radical undertaking that is representative of late 20th century technocultural philosophy. Dery ignores the inherent genius of Africana people in his attempt to argue that African American improvisation is equivalent to a cyberpunk vision of technology anarchy. Dery remains silent that the hierarchy of technological access is as much a mythical invention as it is a tool of invention. He does not dismiss his own assumptions that white people create and own all the "standard" technologies, and Africana people can only appropriate nor does he reject his speculation that Africana people are unable to envision their own futures. Instead, he asserts that Africana people are performing activities similar to what contemporary white writers imagined white people would do in their predictions of the future. He positions white imagination as the standard of radicalism, and believes that painting Africana people as similar to 'radical' white technoculturalists is enough to generate interest in their cultural creations.

In the 2008 republishing of "Black to the Future" in the anthology *Afro-Future Females*, Dery's interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose were not included. This alteration is noteworthy because the interviews demonstrate Dery's lack of knowledge about Africana culture and peoples that leads to his misrepresentation of their technological agency. The actual practitioners of what he calls Afrofuturism provide a keener comprehension of the meaning and trajectory of Afrofuturism discourse than he gives. Dery asks Tate to comment on how Africana spiritual productions such as "goofer dust" and "mojo"[166] operate similarly to input devices for virtual reality systems. In his comment, Tate depicts Africana people as having a heritage of theorizing about the

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[166] Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 207-208.
Goofer-dust, is dirt gathered from a grave; or "goober dust" dust from ground up peanuts; mojo is a traditional Africana American amulet.

unknown, their place in the world, and other science fictional themes. He does not use the

term Afrofuturism, but he expresses that Africana science fiction,

continu[es] a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death. SF represents a kind of rationalist, positivist, scientific codification of that impulse, but it's still coming from a basic human desire to know the unknowable, and for a lot of Black writers, that desire to know the unknowable directs itself toward self-knowledge.[167]

In the interview between Dery and science fiction writer Samuel Delany, Delany

claims that Dery is only romanticizing Africana culture. In their conversation, Dery

remarks,

[the Rastas] struck me as superlunary Romare Beardens-bricoleurs whose orbital colony was cobbled together from space junk and whose music, Zion Dub, is described by Gibson (in a wonderfully mixed metaphor) as 'a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop'[168]

Dery then asks Delany, a Black man, why he did not mention the Rasta characters

in his previous discussion of cyberpunk literature, since they have been cited as "holding

the promise of a holistic relationship with technology." [169] Delany responds with a

condemning criticism of Gibson's writing and Dery's fascination. According to Delany,

Gibson was ignorant of the Rastafari culture as suggested by his identifying them using

the slang term "Rasta" and never the full term for their spiritual system, "Rastafari."

Additionally, Gibson ascribed the Rastas little value in comparison with other groups in

his universe. For instance, the artificial intelligence, a machine controlled by the

antagonistic corporations, could flawlessly replicate the Rastas' sacred music, Zion Dub.

The Rastas could not differentiate between their music and the music of the machine, so

they could be made to obey the will of the corporations and inadvertently surrender their

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[167] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* 210.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.

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own cultural independence. Delany, then, sarcastically admonishes both Dery and

Gibson,

> *You'll forgive me if, as a Black reader, I didn't leap up to proclaim this*
> *passing presentation of a powerless and wholly nonoppositional set of*
> *Black dropouts, by a Virginia-born white writer, as the coming of the*
> *Black millennium in science fiction; but maybe that's just a Black*
> *thang...*[170]

Delany demonstrates that Dery does not possess enough familiarity with Africana

people or their culture to comprehend how Gibson misappropriated them in

Neuromancer. Dery saw the Rastas as a solution to white technoculturalists' inability to

conceive of a harmonious relationship between nature and technology; However, Dery

was blind to the possibility that the characterization of the fictional group was just

another example of a white man imagining a disempowered Black community. Delany

rebukes Dery for his lack of perspective and scope of what an 'interesting' Black science

fiction character could be. "There are still far more extensive, far more thorough, and far

more interesting presentations of blacks in science fiction than the couple of pages

[Gibson] devotes to the Rastas." As shown through Delany's criticism, Dery's attempt to

describe the unique nature of Afrofuturism is rife with inaccurate and/or simplified

depictions of the Africana experience. Unfortunately, other Afrofuturism scholars repeat

his foundational assumptions.

Over the last twenty years, Afrofuturism has grown from the popular culture

criticism of Dery to an academic methodology. Afrofuturism scholars use the cultural,

speculative, futuristic, and/or technological elements of Africana agents and culture to

critique and analyze art and social phenomena. The most adherent advocate of

Afrofuturism in the academy is sociologist Alondra Nelson. In the late 1990s and early

2000s, Nelson altered the academic direction and geographic location of Afrofuturism.

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[170] Ibid., 195.

Through her conferences, essays, Afrofuturist listserv, and supporting articles and books that clarify and document Afrofuturism's uniqueness and significance, "[Nelson] pushed the conversation of Afrofuturism beyond artistic analysis to the point of creating change for the future."[171] Nelson's definition of Afrofuturism appears as a springboard for expanding other scholars' classification of Afrofuturism almost as frequently as Dery's does.

In the introduction of the Afrofuturist edition of *Social Texts,* Nelson examines the trend of digital theorists proclaiming the "advancements of technology would augured the end of burdensome social identities." [172] They presume that transcending human bodies for cyber identities would free all people from the problems of phenotypical associations such as gender, and race. Nelson argues that the removal of visual indicators does not necessarily remove prejudice and discrimination, when the foundational idea of rejecting your corporality is, in and of itself, a luxury of the privileged class. The division between those who are able to embrace technological innovations such as a virtual landscape, and those who are economically and educationally barred access, most likely would reflect the same racial divisions present in contemporary society. Nelson links this theoretical inequity of access to a post-racial cybernation, with the notion of the digital divide.

Nelson claims, "the underlying assumption of much digital divide rhetoric is that people of color and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society."[173] She refers to Lisa Nakamura's idea that the narrative of technological progress requires a rhetoric of othering even when the (racialized) other is not present;

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[171] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

[172] Alondra Nelson, *Social Texts,* 2.

[173] Alondra Nelson, *Social Texts*, 6.

Non-racialized people, i.e. white people, are harbingers of humanity's future, while those who are racialized, such as Africans, are considered antiquated and irrelevant. Using a Land Rover advertisement published in a South African magazine as a visual aid, Nakamura clarifies how technological progress as propagated by Western cultures is juxtaposed to 'a racialized primitiveness.'

Figure 5: Land Rover Freelander Ad

In the advertisement (Figure 2), a bare-breasted Himba woman stands alone in the desert, after a Land Rover Freelander has driven past.

> *As it accelerates, the force of its back draft pulls her breasts toward it... In this single image, we are presented with a visual metaphor for the ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future) that is the most cutting side of the double-edged concept of the digital divide.[174]*

In a future driven by white technological advancements, African people are literally left in the dust. As digital theorists propose that the future involves transcending the reality of their bodies and their primitive past, they characterize Africana people as an Other. Africana people are read as intrinsically primitive and corporal; therefore, they are not

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[174] Alondra Nelson, *Social Text*, 5.

future-oriented. Only white people can be post-human and post-modern enough to exist in the future.

Nelson proposes Afrofuturism as an alternative theory that "pushes against futurisms that idealize the absence of identity and history."[175] She takes aspects of Dery's and redefines Afrofuturism as a

> *reflection of the Africana diasporic experience. It is concerned with 'sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation that is grounded in the histories of Africana diaspora communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them. Afrofuturism excavates and creates original narratives of identity, technology, and the future; and offers critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture.*[176]

Her definition of Afrofuturism is descriptive, critical, and functional as an academic methodology. First, she acknowledges that Africana people hold a differing perspective than European cultures on the meaning of technology and the future. Africana people do not reject their past as a method to advance their society. They are a *sankofic* people who utilize their past as a fundamental component of their future. Additionally, their technology operates to increase harmony between humans and their environment, and not to exercise control over it. Then, she establishes that Afrofuturism functions as a critical theory. Its objective is to challenge technoculture theories which urge for the development of a post-racial future that ignores social and economic inequities, or designates Africana culture and other marginalized groups as part of "the past" and thereby, useless to any futures. Unlike Dery, Nelson acknowledges the agency of Africana people in her definition. She asserts that Afrofuturism discourse extracts its foundational ideas and concepts from Africana people's experiences. From this

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[175] Rebecca Wanzo, *Black Kirby Presents: In Search of the Motherboxx Connection*, 139.
[176] Alondra Nelson, *Social Texts,* 9.

phenomenological repository, Afrofuturism scholarship produces new methods and methodologies in which to interpret African people's interactions with technology and assists in cultivating and promoting their ideas of progress.

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* serves as an important philosophical basis for Nelson's construction of Afrofuturism. The novel represents an Afrocentric conceptualizing of futurist theorizing that does not dismiss the African past, but embraces its use for the future. In the novel, Reed describes African spiritual concepts with scientific or technological terminologies. *Knockings*, for instance, could be described as intuition, or extra-sensory perception. One of the characters can use his knockings to "chart the course of a hammerhead shark in an ocean thousands of miles away…or charm a cobra in a basket in an Indian marketplace to sleep."[177] In a footnote, Reed defines knockings with scientific jargon; they are "ultra ultra high frequency electromagnetic wave propagation."[178] His choice to describe the phenomena with scientific language demonstrates that Reed does not consider technology antithetical to Africana spirituality. He reacquaints his audience to the fluid relationship between technology and Africanity by merging concepts that appear dichotomous such as intuition and physics. Reed writes *Mumbo Jumbo* as an example of a *future text*, a storehouse where the knowledges of the African past, present, and future intermix. Nelson applies this conceptualization to her construction of Afrofuturism. She suggests that people who engage in Afrofuturism are creating their own *future texts*; they are participating in a "syncretic, borrowing, and

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[177] Ishmael Reed. *Mumbo Jumbo*. (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1972), 26.
[178] Ibid.

remixing of various contributions from ancestors, contemporaries, and generation to come."[179]

Dery and Nelson establish the scope and structure of Afrofuturism for other scholars. In their essays, they assert that Afrofuturism, broadly defined, is the intersection between Black culture, technology, and "things to come."[180] It is a perspective that uses science fiction themes, and other speculations on the future of humanity as a way to analyze Africana phenomena and social and political thought. On the other hand, they offer two different perspectives in which to interpret Africana people's technological agency. Dery performs a form of cultural re-appropriation by using a cyberpunk outlook to analyze Africana technological/futuristic phenomena and productions. Whereas cyberpunk views white males as a marginalized group disenfranchised by a faceless system, i.e. they become black. "Cyberpunk is arguing that the planet, already turned black, must embrace that the technological interaction inherited from jazz and now the rap avant garde can reintegrate humanity with the runaway machine."[181] Dery praises Africana culture for being a revolutionary force that provides white culture a solution to their problem of how to remain human with a growing dependence on technology. He submits Afrofuturism as a 'Mammy' device that benefits white cultural domination, and does nothing to develop Africana society. On the other hand, Nelson emphasizes the political agenda of Afrofuturism. She characterizes it as a lens that interrogates Africana culture's employment of modern technologies, or their imagination of future worlds. By

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[179] Nina Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 151.

[180] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* 182; Alondra Nelson, *Social Text*, 7.

[181] Mark Sinker. "Loving the Alien: Black Science Fiction." *The Wire,* May 2007.

uncovering these Africana approaches, Afrofuturism becomes an alternative voice to the white technoculture. She sees Afrofuturism "reclaiming theorizing about the future,"[182] for the marginalized. Other scholars provide additional elements to the definition of Afrofuturism, but they derive the direction of their adjustments from Dery and/or Nelson's approaches.

Kodwo Eshun expands upon Dery's argument that Africana people's history can be described as a science fiction nightmare. He demonstrates that the being subjected to alien abductions, and technological exploitation, supports writer Toni Morrison's premise that Africana people, not Europeans, are the first modern people. In the early twentieth century, Futurists argued that 'progress' required a rejection of tradition. The Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who founded the Italian branch of Futurism, claimed that "tradition" was holding Europeans back from their destiny. In his Futurist Manifesto, Marinetti argued for Europe to embrace technology and burn, literally and figuratively, ideas and objects that are slow, historical, feminine, and utilitarian.[183] In using this perception of modernity, Morrison proposes that when Africans experienced the Middle Passage, they were dislocated from their 'traditional' cultures. They faced "the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. They underwent certain kinds of madness, and occasionally they deliberately went mad in order not to lose their mind. These strategies for survival made the truly modern person."[184] Eshun proposes that Afrofuturism is a perspective that can "rewrite reality" to uncouple the meaning of

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[182] Nelson, Alondra. "AfroFuturism: Past-Future Vision," *Colorlines*, (April 30, 2000): 34.
[183] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Futurist Manifesto," 1909. Accessed September 21, 2015. http://vserver1.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html.
[184] Ibid.

modernity with utopia. In retelling an alternative history that joins modernity with the dehumanization of Africana people, he can reveal the relationship between contemporary technophilia and systems of trauma. He subscribes to Morrison's claim that Africana people were the first people to experience modernity. If they are the first modern people, then the imperialist and colonialist era of European trade in African bodies is the quintessential moment that establishes the meaning of modernity and modern humans. Progress, therefore, is a concept that depends upon the exploitation of Africana people for European benefit.

Eshun sees Afrofuturism as a critical dialogue about race, technology, future, and the power-dynamics created because of the ideologies of white cultural domination generated during the 16th century and cultivated until the present. He suggests that imagining alternative histories or relating Africana people to science fiction tropes is a method to access previously inaccessible knowledges about a given subject.[185] For Eshun, Afrofuturism operates to alter the manner in which systems of oppression are understood. He assserts that Afrofuturism,

> *assembles conceptual approaches and countermemorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations. [It is] a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken.[186]*

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[185] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 298.
[186] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 298-99, 301.

In other words, Eshun identifies Afrofuturist inquiry as an epistemological tactic that uses speculation to uncover unexplored perspectives about the Africana experience. Eshun appears to agree with Nelson that Afrofuturism has a political agenda. The results of Afrofuturism challenge the universality of white supremacy in narratives of the past, present, and future.

Science fiction scholar Lisa Yaszek applies Eshun's proposition of the function of Afrofuturism to her study of literature. She defines Afrofuturism as "a larger aesthetic mode where many artists in multiple genres and media forms are united by their shared interest in projecting Black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences." [187] In her article, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," Yaszek proposes that Afrofuturism is a perspective employed by numerous authors of Africana American literature from the 19th century until the present day. She argues that in literature, Afrofuturism operates as a distinct genre that may be perceived as similar to science fiction written by white writers, however, its lineage traces to Africana social and political thought. It

> *disrupts, challenges, and otherwise transforms those futures with fantastic stores that…'move seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones'…and thus between blackness as a dystopic relic of the past and as a harbinger of new and more promising alien future.* [188]

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[187] Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future." *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 42.
[188] Lisa Yaszek, "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2/3, (June/September 2005): 301-302.

Yaszek refutes claims that Afrofuturism is an offshoot of white science fiction. She links Afrofuturism to the Africana political project to reclaim epistemological space from white culture.

Yaszek grounds Afrofuturism in Africana history and determines that Afrofuturism began with authors such as Martin R. Delany, W.E.B Du Bois, George Schulyer, etc. "[Nineteenth]-century Afrofuturist authors were bound together by a shared interest in representing the changing relations of science and society as they specifically pertained to African American history – including, of course, the history of the future." [189] She chronologically examines other works that use science fictional and/or speculative fictional motifs, future imaginings, or societal/personal possibilities to convey Africana politics.

As a case study, Yaszek argues that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an Afrofuturist novel about the potentiality of a Black future and the history of Africana people being used as instruments to forward other peoples' agendas. She proposes that the narrative follows the unnamed protagonist through pseudo-realistic scenarios where he discovers that he is unable to find his own identity and future because other [white] groups, such as university trustees, communists, etc. use his Black body as a tool to reify their visions of the future. In the end, he escapes the various imposed futures and survives in stasis "at the edge of revelation and at the edge of action"[190] of his own development. The protagonist's light-filled and sound-filled underground home is a metaphor for the need of Africana people to possess a metaphysical and/or physical space in in order for them to acquire self-visibility. For Yaszek, *The Invisible Man* is an Afrofuturist work because it examines the significance of Africana potential. The novel explores how

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[189] Lisa Yaszek, *Socialism and Democracy*, 44.
[190] Lisa Yaszek, *Socialism and Democracy*, 44.

African bodies are exploited in the war over who controls the future, but also affirms, "the African holds within himself the possibility of a new future that is not ready to be born."[191] Yaszek's analysis demonstrates the application of an Africana political perspective in a speculative and fantastical medium. It reflects that Afrofuturism, "is not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity,"[192] but "centralizes Africana diasporic histories and practices in order to sustain progressive visions of the future."[193]

Musician and scholar George Lewis and Journalist Ytasha Womack do not expand the core components of the previously mentioned definitions of Afrofuturism, but they both meta-theorize about the reigning interpretations of aspects of Afrofuturism. Lewis's article is an introduction to a special issue on "the intersection of music, race, gender, technology, science fiction, diaspora, etc.," but he finds it curious that "the term 'Afrofuturism' rarely appears in the articles."[194] He argues that approaching Afrofuturism as an academic concept limits the range of Africana phenomena that can be classified as Afrofuturistic. Afrofuturism does not represent the plethora of "African American voices that have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come."[195] Research into the multifaceted engagements with technology across geographic and epistemological boundaries were not included in the Afrofuturist fold, despite Nelson claiming it included "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora."[196] Lewis claims that there was a lack of scholarship that analyzed

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[191] Lisa Yaszek, *Socialism and Democracy*, 51.
[192] Alexander Weheliye, "Feenin: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 71 (Summer 2002): 30.
[193] Susana M Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's Fledgling." WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 40, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2012): 153.
[194] George Lewis, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, 139.
[195] Mark Dery, Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, 182; Nelson, *Social Texts*, 7; George Lewis, "Foreword: After Afrofuturism." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 2 (May 2008): 140.
[196] George Lewis, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, 139.

international and non-MEDC[197] issues of Blackness and technology, such as the issues with access to digital and computing technologies, and the effects of western modernization in Africa and the Caribbean.[198] This particular problem has its origins in the adoption of Dery's conceptualization of Afrofuturism that assumes Afrofuturist tropes only mimic the white cultural image of science fiction. This single perspective displaces Africana interrogations of technology and speculations on the future that are not attempts at appropriating white visions of "flying saucers and interplanetary travel."[199] Ideologies that are harmonious with nature on earth or involved past events and people affecting the present are not understood to be part of the Afrofuturist political project.

Lewis questioned the relevancy of Afrofuturism if it was not accomplishing its critical objective of reclaiming alternative Africana pasts and futures by approaching other histories of technology that are local, racially complex, and/or disjointed. [200] He suggested that Afrofuturist creative manifestations, not academic scholarship, express the strategies of adaption, improvisation, and experimentation that illustrate the ingenuity and significance of Afrofuturist works. One of the founders of the Afrofuturist listserv which started Afrofuturism's formal academic trajectory, DJ Spooky aka Paul Miller complements Lewis's argument. He claims "Afrofuturism is dead, because the culture at large caught up to and bypassed many of the issues [Afrofuturism] was initially supposed to be dealing with."[201]

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[197] Mayhew, Susan. "More Economically Developed Country." In *A Dictionary of Geography*. : Oxford University Press, 2009. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199231805.001.0001/acref-9780199231805-e-2087.
   More economically developed country is "a country with: low birth, death, and infant mortality rates (characteristically around 10; around 10; and under 12 per thousand, respectively); less than 10% of the workforce in agriculture; high levels of nutrition, secondary schooling, literacy, electricity consumption per head; and per capita GDP generally above $US20."

[198] George Lewis, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, 143-144.

[199] George Lewis, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, 142.

[200] Ibid., 143.

[201] Paul D. Miller, *The Book of Ice.* Brooklyn, (NY: Mark Beatty Publisher, 2011), 122.

Lewis disapproves of restructuring the philosophical arm of Afrofuturism to better align with the practical endeavors he observes as the more valid forms of Afrofuturism. He argues that labels "tend towards hegemonies that reduce mobility and clog communication lines."[202] In her book, *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture,* Womack invalidates Lewis's assertion that Afrofuturism attempts to regulate the meaning and purpose of Africana creative expressions. Her many interviewees describe Afrofuturism as a catalyst that expands the horizons of Africana thought and imagination.

Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture serves as an invaluable reference documenting the present state of Afrofuturism in the United States. Womack journeys, across time and space, to record the voices of artists, academics, and activists who practice Afrofuturism. She demonstrates that the multitude of Africana people engaging in art, music, literature, feminism, history, philosophy, etc., in order to manifest their future ideations do not resemble Dery's conjecture that Africana people appropriate white-generated images of technology.[203] These practical and academic Afrofuturists consider Afrofuturism: a response to dystopic Africana futures, a disruption of stereotypes that limit the creativity of Black identity, a form of resistance to oppressive structures, a compendium of technological function in Africana life, a revival of Africana scientific inquiry, and a manufacturer of community structures and self-esteem. After Womack's interviews with the many self-proclaimed Afrofuturists, nerds, Afrosurrealists, scholars, artists, writers, technologists, etc., she proposes that Afrofuturism is a "tool for wielding imagination for personal change and societal growth."[204]

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[202] George Lewis, *Journal of the Society for American Music,* 150.

[203] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[204] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

Nelson interviews filmmaker and artist D. Denenge Akpem who teaches a course entitled "Afrofuturism: a Pathway to Liberation." She believes that Afrofuturism stimulates "the creative ability to manifest action and transformation; two processes that have been essential to Blacks in the Diaspora."[205] The perspective personally inspires her to manifest Africana concepts into performance and material art, for the purpose of recovering and transforming "those ancient ways of Africana spirituality and cosmology."[206] Akpem uses Afrofuturism as her lens to interpret "how ritual healing in art can heal trauma. For ten days at an art gallery in New York, she performed a self-created ritual of song, including the creation and destruction of clay babies, the building of an elaborate headpiece in honor of the trickster god Pan, and the mashing of remaining clay to dust."[207] Akpem used her performance art to speculate about the ability of an agent to heal from trauma as a way to change their personal destiny or the destiny of the collective. At the end, she was not sure if "alternative destinies were set in motion," but she was sure that she "set the stage…"[208]

In recognizing the epistemological deficiencies of other definitions, I hack Afrofuturism for use as a theoretical perspective within Africana Studies. Hacking is a tool employed by Afrofuturists as a practice of signifyin' an available concept or object to "create, enhance, or fix something."[209] In other words, I tinkered with and augmented

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[205] Ibid.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid.; Hazel, Tempest. "Black To The Future Series: An Interview with D. Denenge Akpem." The Chicago Arts Archive: A Sixty Inches From Center Project. July 23, 2012. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/archive/?p=16638.

[209] In a digitally published version of "Black to the Future," Mark Dery, who coined the term Afrofuturism, uses the idiom "hacking" to parallel a technological act of rebellion with a skill of Black survival. When the piece was written in 1993, "to hack" meant infiltrating computer systems to disrupt []. "Young programmers employed their computer skills to harmful ends – creating and disseminating computer viruses, breaking into computer systems for mischief, and deliberately causing computers to crash...the term "hacker" had a punk, nihilistic edge." (Sam Williams. *Free as in Freedom (2.0): Richard Stallman and the Free Software Revolution*. Boston, MA: Free Software Foundation, 2010. p. 213. Dery compares hacking to Henry Louis Gates concept signifyin' - "a genre of linguistic performance that allows

other scholars' definitions of Afrofuturism to develop an amalgamated definition that better suits my goals and needs as an Africana Studies scholar who employs Afrocentricity as her foundational methodology. Asante argues that while Africana culture should be the primary source of concepts, Afrocentric scholars can learn from concepts developed from other epistemological locations; however, he cautions against fully adopting those ideas without modification, because "methods used by non-Afrocentrists in an effort to predict and control Africana behavior"[210] may conflict with the Africana worldview, and by extension, the mission of Africana Studies.

Considering these issues, I approached my hack with one objective in mind: to demonstrate the connection between Afrocentricity and my conceptualization of Afrofuturism. In her detailed examination of the Afrocentric paradigm, Mazama compiles data from leading scholars writing on Afrocentricity. From this data, she produces seven criteria with which to examine the characteristics of methodologies and theories used in Africana Studies. They are:

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for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels." (Sarah Florini. "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'" *Television & New Media* 2014, Vol. 15(3) 223–237 p.224. Signifyin' is a cultural practice that trained Africana people to "decipher complex codes." Since enslavement, Africana people gave multiple meanings to the words their oppressors forced them to speak; they practiced reading this multivariate vocabulary through forms of "play" like the dozens, "a verbal art game of ritual insult." (E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures." in *Performance Studies Handbook*, eds. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 454.) Africana people were empowered by "their possession of the knowledge to decipher complex codes" and used this technique in places like work songs, spirituals, and conversations, to act out liberation. Dery compares this rhetorical tool of Africana people with the anti-establishment action [primarily performed by white males] of using computer code - a creation of government and private industry – against government and private industry. He infers that hacking is the new signifyin,' "the deconstructionist ability to crack cultural codes goes by a better-known name, these days. They call it hacking." In 2014, "hacking" has changed. Technologist Mjumbe Poe categories hacking as a form of creativity, especially in a manner that is unconventional, i.e. "outside the box." It identifies the practice of "using what you have to make what you want/need." (Correspondence Mjumbe Poe, December 29, 2014) For more information on hacking: http://www.codeforamerica.org/blog/2013/05/06/what-is-a-civic-hacker. ((Dery, "Black to the Future 1.0" (web)).

[210] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentric Manifesto,* 101.

The African experience must determine all inquiry, the spiritual is important and must be given its due place, immersion in the subject is necessary, holism is a must, intuition must be relied on, not everything is measurable because not everything that is significant is material, and the knowledge generated by the Afrocentric methodology must be liberating.[211]

The seven criteria reflect aspects of Africana cosmology, Africana Studies scholarly tradition, and Africana political thought. Mazama argues that Afrocentric scholarship is not just an epistemological project; its objective includes restoring the integrity of Africana spirituality as a valid way of knowing. Africana people participate in "an ontological order that includes entities on spiritual planes of existence."[212] The individualistic and empirical approaches to knowledge construction as dictated by Western philosophy do not provide space for interrogations of the phenomena that are incalculable. To deny the presence of spirituality in one's research about Africana agents would be akin to attempting to understand an individual in a vacuum. Additionally, the Afrocentric scholar immerses him/herself in the subject, and does not engage in objectivity. Western empirical research proposes that the "researcher must gain as much distance as possible from the object"[213] in order to have a holistic perspective. Afrocentric scholarship perceives this proposition as a distortion of African social reality, which bases reality upon Africana worldview. "The social context of African people encourages a collective as opposed to an individual separation."[214] Afrocentric research assumes that for the researcher to have perspective, they must understand the relationship between the subject of study and themselves. Lastly, Afrocentricity is "a systematic approach that produces new and innovative knowledges that are liberating to Africana

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[211] Ama Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002): 26.

[212] Mazama, Mambo Ama. "Afrocentricity and African Spirituality." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 2 (November 2002): 232.

[213] Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 27.

[214] Ibid.

people.[215] To be engaged in Afrocentric scholarship, "one must not perform research for the sake of activity; it must be for the sake of achieving liberation."[216]

Theories and methods that claim to reside within Africana Studies and Afrocentricity should reflect the essence of both in their structure and function. Otherwise, "[the discipline's and paradigm's] relevance to the academy, its scholars, and the African world community which it serves rests on an unstable foundation."[217] I reconstruct Afrofuturism as a theoretical perspective within Africana Studies that privileges Africana culture, genius, and liberation. I do not structure my study to be guided by an Afrofuturism that does not assert Africana agency within either the creation of technology and techniques or speculation. I refuse to participate in a practice of dis-agency, "dismissing the contributions of Africans as players or actors within their own world."[218] Instead of contributing to the suppression of Africana intelligence, I hacked Afrofuturism to be a theoretical perspective that "encourages experimentation, reimagines identities, and activates liberation"[219] from a position that centers the African worldview.

I propose that Afrofuturism is a theoretical perspective, a set of principles and assumptions drawn from a particular epistemological framework that guides the application of "methods whether they are qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods."[220] It depends upon the centrality of the agency of Africana people, because they are the authors and operators of cultural institutions and manifestations that drive the

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[215] Marquita Pellerin, "Benefits of Afrocentricity in Exploring Social Phenomena: Understanding Afrocentricity as a Social Science Methodology." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 4 (2012): 159.

[216] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentric Manifesto,* 12.

[217] Serie McDougal III, "Africana Studies' Epistemic Identity: An Analysis of Theory and Epistemology in the Discipline," Journal of African American Studies 18 (2014): 248.

[218] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentric Manifesto,* 12.

[219] Ingrid LaFleur qtd in Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

[220] Michael Tillotson and Serie McDougal. "Applied Africana Studies," *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 105.

development of the Africana present and future. Afrofuturism is concerned with the conceptualization, production, and replication of Africana technologies and speculations. It is a critical tool that uses intra-culturally generated or hacked devices, techniques, and processes to support the development of Africana society. Afrofuturism uses speculation and technological information to discover and produce knowledge about the African experience that transgresses oppressive narratives that denigrate Africana technological agency and potentiality.

Nelson and Eshun's definitions of Afrofuturism inspired the structure and content of my hacked definition. Although they do not categorize Afrofuturism as a perspective, they do demonstrate that it operates as a systematic way of perceiving certain knowledges. I specifically classify it as a theoretical perspective, because Afrofuturism functions as an amalgam of systems of thought that are guided by the tenets found within the Africana worldview, particularly, those concerned with agency, technology, and speculation. Lewis's repudiation for Afrofuturism to incorporate multiple types of engagements of Africanity, technology and speculation leads me to emphasize that Afrofuturism does not exist outside of Africana agency. Womack's documentation of Afrofuturists confirmed that Afrofuturism concepts develop from Afrofuturist productions and Afrofuturist creations originate from Afrofuturist thinking. She supplies practical examples that support Nelson's premise that Afrofuturism is a repository of methods and methodologies in which to interpret and produce Africana technological and speculative agency. Her study encouraged me to acknowledge the complex association between Afrofuturism and the Africana experience. Yaszek links Afrofuturism to Africana social and political thought, and refutes Dery's claim that Africana people do not write speculative fictions. She affirmed that there exists a legacy of Africana authors writing fantastical and hypothetical scenarios describing Africana people's struggles against white cultural domination. Yaszek positions Africana people at the center of their

philosophizing, and asserts that their speculations unsettle the lies of white supremacy. Eshun treats Afrofuturism as a technique that influences and emphasizes what characteristics of past, present and future events are used to interpret future movements. I adopted Eshun and Yaszek's approaches in order to address that Afrofuturism itself is a technology. It operates as a mechanism to fight perceptions that exclude Africana people from giving input to the direction of human progress. With billions of dollars spent on science fiction media and the future industry, European descended people use their economic power to represent Africana people as technophobic, primitive, invisible, or as slaves to western progress. By promoting alternative narratives, Afrofuturism operates as a condemnation of white cultural domination attempts to control everyone's tomorrows.[221] In the battle for the recognition of Africana humanity, Afrofuturism operates as future text. It is a compilation of strategies and tactics with which to revise, reclaim, and reposition the value of Africana technological and speculative creations in Africana and global history, thought, and practice.

Pantechnological Perspective

An important aspect of Afrofuturism is the usage, function, and meaning of technology. Technologies are "the variations of human augmentation. They extend the human ability to realize some specific purpose."[222] Eyeglasses, walking canes, cars, cell phones, bulldozers all operate to amplify the range of human senses, movement, communication, and other biological and social processes. This premise infers that technologies have an associative nature with humans; humans construct tools to

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[221] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 291.

[222] Beth Coleman, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 184; William M. King, "The Importance of Black Studies for Science and Technological Policy." In *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr., (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), 777.

accomplish a particular task. They function to fulfill human needs. Agents "are

continuously supplemented by technologies and techniques."[223]

In its colloquial usage, the term technology refers to "high technology," the class

of machinery that most people feel is the most advanced for their era. In the early 21st

century, Western societies identify certain "consumer end products" (e.g., smart phones,

digital cameras, social media), and "futuristic" industries (e.g. nanotechnology,

biotechnology, aerospace technologies, and robotics) as constituting the *technology* of the

age. From an Africana worldview, technologies are the material and immaterial objects

that Africana agents create, use, and maintain in the development of their social, cultural,

and personal realities. Technologies serve humanity; they are mechanisms that preserve

nzuri[224] between individuals and between humans and their environment.[225] For example,

the spiritual system Santería is an Africana technology. George Lewis suggests, "Santería

is designed to facilitate communication between humans and the Orichás and ancestors,

and prepare the neo-Yoruban Afrofuture."[226] It is a device (or a set of techniques) which

extends humans' ability to communicate with the intangible world.

Despite Africana people possessing their own perspective about the role of

technology, anti-Black racism and white supremacist ideologies promote the myth that

Whites are the bearers of technological agency, and that only their outlook of the world

can produce technological innovations that advance society. The West classifies devices

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[223] Ibid., 183.

[224] Kariamu Welsh-Asante, "The Aesthetic Conceptualization of Nzuri" in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 9.

Nzuri is an axiological concept that identifies the intrinsic goodness of an object or subject, or its ability to keep balance and order. "Welsh-Asante states, "nzuri describes a foundational idea with the African worldview that beauty and good are not only synonymous but interchangeable, and that the opposite of beauty is not ugly, but that is it not synonymous with bad."

[225] Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community*, (London: Thorsons, 1999), 59-60.

[226] George E. Lewis, "Foreword: After Afrofuturism." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2*, no. 2 (May 2008): 142.

as 'high technologies' as a method to designate that not all technologies are relevant to Western forms of progress. Technologies that are not "advanced," made from intangible materials, or cannot be empirically measured are considered mundane and/or primitive. The dichotomy between "high technologies" and "primitive technologies" implicitly inscribes a hierarchy that Western cultural creations are superior, and other people's technologies are backward.

> *The concept of Western technology involves a masked essentialism and immanence that cement the relationship between European man and modern technology. And posit that any participation in the technological revolution must necessarily import European culture.* [227]

The ranking of technologies by their worth to White cultural progress also serves to designate those who use "progressive" technologies as future-oriented, and those who do not, as "backward" people. Africana people are not viewed as a part of the forward progression of humanity by Europeans, despite the reality that Africana people possess a distinctive technological agency. Instead, they are barred from 'modern' technological access and education and their technological innovations are ignored and/or stolen to be modernized in the Western tradition. "The implications of this hierarchy have been devastating to the cultures of Africa which are normally seen in binary opposition to Western culture and technology."[228] *This* fabrication of history and creations distorts the truth that Africana people are "a central contributor to technology development in world history and present day."[229] Even in Africana communities, one can find individuals who believe that Africana people construct primitive tools, or that "they are non-participatory

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[227] Manthia Diawara. "In Search of Africa." (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 148.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Michelle Wright, "Find a Place in Cyberspace: Black Women, Technology, and Identity," Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies 26, no. 1 (2005): 49.

in the incipient technosphere."[230]The perspective that African people's technologies have

no purpose in the contemporary era,

> *strips Black people of technological agency. It inherently closes down*
> *discussions about the ways African American people consume and use*
> *technology, and conceals the reasons that Black people produce meanings*
> *for technological artifacts, practices, and knowledge that regularly*
> *subvert the architectured, or constructed, meanings of [Western]*
> *technology.* [231]

In 1963, Black Arts movement poet and playwright Amiri Baraka discussed the

power of words. He asserts that they are a symbolic link between the ideologies of a

particular culture and the entity to be described. Their use can manifest a power dynamic

that affects the actions towards the subject or object being described by the word, e.g. by

naming Africans heathens, they can be treated like slaves.[232] Baraka provides the

theoretical basis for the presumption that words are technologies. He claims, "Words

have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world's

realities."[233] Words act as tools that manipulate what thought system a person uses to

interpret the world, however, for words to function effectively they must be oriented from

a culture. The worldview of a culture will invariably flow within words, and, one can

assume, it flows through other processes and tools used by cultural agents. Like Baraka's

description of words, technologies "are influenced by the values, attitudes, beliefs,

ideologies, and behavior of their creators and by the cultures in which they are created,

developed, and deployed."[234]

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[230] Anna Everett, *Social Text*, 132.
[231] Rayvon Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 641.
[232] Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Expressive Language." *Home: Social Essays*, (New York: Morrow, 1966), 169.
[233] Ibid., 168.
[234] William M. King, *The African American Studies Reader*, 773.

In the article "Technology and Ethos," Baraka asserted, "Machines have the morality of their inventors."[235] His statement was warning Africana people who sought liberation from oppression that the technology of the Western world holds the sensibility and characteristic of the West. The machines of Western society contain fundamental components of white cultural domination and anti-Black racism. Afrofuturist Ann Everett experienced the "racist ghost in the machine" every time she turned on her computer for work. The startup screen for her computer displayed the words: "Pri. Master Disk, Pri. Slave Disk, Sec. Master, Sec. Slave."[236] On a daily basis, her computer became a reminder of the enslavement of her people. When Everett considered the existence of a person or group of people who generated her computer's outputs, she pondered the intent and cultural location of these computer programmers. She notes, "Even though I do not assume a racial affront or intentionality in this peculiar deployment of the slave and master coupling, its appearance each time I turn on my computer nonetheless causes me concern."[237] Although Everett cannot prove that the objective of the operating system manufacturer was to reinstitute social hierarchies, the technology indicates the presence of a culture that supports ideologies of domination.

Baraka's statement about machine's morality was also an encouragement to Africana people, so that they may "make forms that express Africana people truthfully and totally."[238] Baraka asserts, "those of us who have freed ourselves know that our creations need not emulate the white man's. [If we are] freed of an oppressor, we must be 'free from the oppressor's spirit,' as well."[239] That is to say, the tools of the oppressor

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[235] Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Technology & Ethos: Vol. 2 Book of Life." In *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965,* (New York: Random House, 1971), 157.
[236] Anna Everett, *Social Text*, 125.
[237] Anna Everett, *Social Text*, 125.
[238] Amiri Imamu Baraka, *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965,* 157.
[239] Ibid., 156-57.

mirror the ideology of oppressor; to achieve African liberation, African people should construct technologies that reflect African values. If machines possess the morality of their inventors, then the technologies Africana people produce should hold the sensibilities and characteristics of Africana people.

Linking a tools' function to its society constructs a discourse that compels Africana people to be aware of the potential dangers of non-African technologies, as well as to exhibit their agential power and manufacture and manage the mechanisms that will produce Africana futures. John Jennings argued that Afrofuturism was the epistemological discourse that approaches the purpose of technologies from an Africana worldview. It "embraces the myriad of ways that Africana people acquire technological agency by being resourceful, innovative, and most important, creative."[240] Moreover, he claims that Afrofuturism renders reality through a *pantechnological perspective.* Through the *pantechnological perspective*, Afrofuturism assumes that "everything can be interpreted as a type of technology" [241] and most human constructions "function as prosthetics that produce various effects relating to Africana agents' needs."[242] In viewing objects from this lens, one can characterize that they possess the capability to be built, used, "hacked into, decoded, and made to function for a new agenda."[243] Treating everything as "tool-like" disrupts assumptions that items do not have a user, exist "outside" of a cultural construction, or possess a universal meaning. For example, approaching social constructs from the pantechnological perspective "reconceptualizes how they fit into larger patterns of meaning and power."[244] In Western philosophical

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[240] Rayvon Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 641.
[241] John Jennings qtd in Julian Chambliss, *PopMatters*.
[242] John Jennings qtd in Robert Loss, *PopMatters*.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Beth Coleman, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 184-85.

discourse, concepts such as race, gender, class, etc. are not often characterized as mechanisms of human agency. Viewing "[social constructs] as a technology relocates [the social construct] from being a trait, into a tool,"[245] and links it with a specific user." "[Technologies] are fundamentally human endeavors and much is lost in an examination of the products of those endeavors whenever technologies are separated from the people who made them." For instance, race operates as if it has no inventor, and consequently, it appears as if does not exist under a specific worldview.[246] Yet, if race is regarded as a technology, then it has a user. Connecting the West to the development of a hierarchal race concept, "adds functionality to the subject, helps form location, and provides information."[247]

Artist and Filmmaker Cauleen Smith approaches Blackness with a pantechnological perspective. She remarks, "[Blackness] has been used as a technology against us [African Americans] – being marked with certain race determines your movement, access, and privileges."[248] Her comment exposes race as a "disruptive technology" that alters the dynamics of personal encounters so that individuals are "interrogated by a system based on biological representation and networks of power."[249] The objective of using race is to produce a social structure of privilege and disenfranchisement.

Afrofuturism scholars who utilize a pantechnological perspective aim to locate the technological characteristics of Africana phenomena. Their approach reflects the tenets of *emergent strategy,* a series of actions developed from the philosophy embedded in the

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[245] Ibid.

[246] William M. King, *The African American Studies Reader*, 773.

[247] Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 192-93.

[248] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

[249] Beth Coleman, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 178.

fictional works of Octavia Butler.[250] It encourages the development of complex ideas with "relatively simple concepts,"[251] assessing everything as potential resource, and acting as Africana agents of change.

METHOD

Identity Performance as an analytical focus

In "Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Performative Acts," cultural theorist Manthia Diawara claims that Africana Studies has undergone a shift of concentration from what he terms, "Oppression studies" to "Performance Studies." Oppression Studies, he states, seeks to "uncover and decipher the exclusion of Blacks from the benefits of modernity."[252] Its focus is on the influences that adversely affect Africana people. The approach of Oppression Studies does not originate from Africana cultural systems, therefore, nor do researchers within this framework produce solutions for Africana people to implement. Oppression Studies positions Africana people as objects of analysis, an objective that is contrary to the goal of the Afrocentric perspective, and Africana Studies. Moreover, examining the Africana experience with attention placed upon Africana people's racial oppression poses a problem to Africana Studies. The intersectional realities as lived by all Africana populations (Black women, men, genderqueer, etc.)

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[250] Adrienne Brown, "Outro" in Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, eds. Walidah Imarisha, Adrienne M. Brown, and Sheree R. Thomas. (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 280.
　　　　Emergent strategy is practice that "aligns with nature, forms and maintains relationships, builds resilience, embraces adaptability and change, and develops complexity from simple interactions." Writer andrienne maree brown converted the central tenet of Butler's Earthseed, "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change" into a list of actionable objectives that "creates a foundation for changing the way marginalized group strategize on their path to justice."
　　　　[251] Adrienne Brown, "Outro" in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, eds. Walidah Imarisha, Adrienne M. Brown, and Sheree R. Thomas. (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 288.
　　　　[252] Manthia Diawara, *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, 265.

cannot be understood with a one-dimensional analysis on race. Multidimensional

oppressions due to gender, class, sexual orientation, etc., become indescribable if race is

the only methodological lens. [253] In such a situation, Africana Studies could only express

an African experience in contrast to a white European one – which is the ideal racial

position, instead of exploring the diversity of Africanity. Diawara asserts, "Black

Performance Studies interrogates how Africana people, through discursive actions,

created and continue to create within a post-colonialism/enslavement environment."[254] It

explores how Africana people generate cultural (and arguably national) performative

elements to overcome/manage/resist their oppressions. Diawara stated his claim about the

influence of Black Performance Studies on Black Studies in 1993, and for many years,

the discipline has formed theories and methods that assume "Africana ways of knowing"

can be gathered from "the living of blackness," also known as their *performance*.[255]

Diawara defines performance as "involving an individual or group of people

interpreting an *existing* tradition - reinventing themselves—in front of an audience, or

public."[256] Performance is the result of practicing the rituals and behaviors of family,

friends, cultural community, and other relevant social groups and institutions. The years

of training develop into a set of characteristics that can be acted out and evaluated for

meaning. The interpretation of an individual's performance may reinforce or provide a

counter to "standard" behavior markers. To read a performance requires knowledge of

culture values from where the performance originates, as well as its history, and a proper

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[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid.
[255] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,* 8;
[256] Manthia Diawara, *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, 265.

reaction to the action performed. Yet, performance itself is dynamic; its meaning is constantly being regenerated, as it "only exists as actions, interactions, and relationships."[257]

The aspects that comprise an Africana identity performance are not just gathered from innate or cultural experiences. The history of anti-Black racism brings into play multiple dimensions of "ideological and social processes"[258] that complicate the practice of an individual "acting African." Because of the imbalance of power that favors European-descended cultures, people may assess the performance of Africanity from the perspective of European-descended cultures. They may not "refer to the specific cultural circumstances,"[259] from which the Africana performance belongs and they may regard it as deviant in comparison to White performances. A performer of an Africana identity must contend with their cultural performance being perceived as inauthentic. An Africana performance "is both political and theoretical. It refers to and draws on existing Africana traditions," [260] but it also signifies that the Africana individual occupies an oppositional position to whites. Moreover, Africana performance becomes a mechanism that elicits "the audience's response to emerging images of African people."[261]

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[257] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle Edition.
[258] Bryant Keith Alexander, "Racializing Identity: Performance, Pedagogy, and Regret." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 12-27.
[259] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle Edition.
[260] Manthia Diawara, *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, 265.
[261] Ibid.

According to bell hooks, performance is "equipment for living."[262] It is utilized

by the Africana community "to confront the issues of humanization and to resist."[263] She

asserts,

> *Performance has been a place where [African people] have reclaimed*
> *subjugated knowledge and historical memory. It has been a space of*
> *transgression where new identities and radicalised Black subjectivities*
> *emerge, illuminating our place in history in ways that challenge and*
> *interrogate, that highlight the shifting nature of Black experience. African-*
> *American performance has been a site for the imagination of future*
> *possibilities.[264]*

As a people who cohabitate with their oppressors, acting out Africanity "as subjects, not

objects seeking approval from white culture"[265] can be rewarding for an individual and

their culture. An individual can practice their performances of identity in a way that

affirms their cultural location. The individual can perform in spaces where members of

the community are able to react properly to the performance due to their knowledge of

the historical and personal experiences embedded within the performance. "The act of

publically asserting African humanity has been a challenge to forms of domestic

colonization that seek to over-determine the cultural aspects of Africana people."[266]

Recreating of the self within the purview of a knowledgeable community makes a habit

of developing strategies of resistance to oppressive images and interpretations of Black

life.

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[262] bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 42.

[263] Ibid.

[264] bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*. (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 220.

[265] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 211.

[266] Ibid*.,* 212.

Black womanhood exhibits the same problems and benefits of Africana identity performance, except with the added dimension of a performance of gender. Unconsciously and consciously, in everyday life and during spectacles, Africana women express traits that a viewer can interpret as Black womanhood, however multiple groups claim knowledge of the symbols and markers in which to evaluate Black womanhood performance. In their own communities, Africana women may perform culturally derived Africana womanhoods and feel affirmed by their community. In interactions with European-descended people, Africana women, out of fear or lack of confidence, may find themselves behaving in ways that confirm EDMs of Black womanhood.

In this study, I continue approaching inquiry from a position that acknowledges the performative element of the African experience as a factor in creating theories about Africana phenomena. I "highlight the discursive effects of behaviors and actions and point out how they are historically situated"[267] in examining Africana women's identity performances in the presence of controlling images. In addition, I interrogate identity performance from an Afrofuturism theoretical perspective. I assume that Black womanhood can "function as a prosthetic" that produces various effects relating to a Black woman's needs."[268]

Afrofuturism scholars often approach the study of identity from the pantechnological perspective, which gives a temporal and functional criterion in which to interrogate the reality and potentiality of Africana identity performance. They examine

[267] E. Patrick Johnson, "Quare Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 136.
    [268] John Jennings qtd in Robert Loss, *PopMatters*.

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how Africana agents performs their identity like an instrument that can unveil the agential intent within performing an identity. In John Jennings and Reynaldo Anderson's analysis of Kanye West's visual images and lyrics, the two authors show that West situates his body in science fictional worlds as a means to demonstrate themes of Africana identity. West appears in his music videos in a variety of incarnations of one-dimensional Black manhood: he is shown as the epitome of cool, as a constructed automaton, as a victim of experimentation, a monstrous rapist of white women, and a personification of darkness. Jennings and Anderson argue that West "reprograms and hacks" his identity like software, so "he can shift and upgrade to fit the perceptions of the public."[269] His manipulation of his visual image hinders his audience from reducing him to a singular idea at a particular time. He uses computer technology to swing between public perceptions of Black manhood, and his own personal identity as a Chicago-born, rapper often within the same music video. He challenges consumer culture's expectation to swallow his art and body effortlessly by instead offering his audience a representation of Kanye West that is not easily ingested.

Paul Youngquist proposes that an individual's identity shapes the space in which they occupy. In the cause of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustav Vassa, Youngquist claims that the African "turned identity diasporic, producing new possibilities for mobility and agency among subjugated populations."[270]First, he agrees with Vincent Carretta that *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is (mostly) a work of fiction.

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[269] Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, 43.
[270] Paul Youngquist, "The Afro Futurism of DJ Vassa." *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 2, (2005): 181.

Carretta found some documentation that he believes places Vassa's birthplace in the Carolinas and not in what is contemporary Nigeria.[271] According to Youngquist, the revelation does not diminish the texts' worth as a representative document of Africana thought and history during the European Trade in Africana bodies. He claims that the narrative is a treatise of the African sailor Gustav Vassa. It signifies how he remixed and reclaimed Africana identities to produce a biographical mixtape of enslaved and free Africans in the 18th century. As a sailor, Vassa developed a global perspective of the world. Through his travels across the Atlantic and interacting with multiple kinds of people, he could not completely conceive of himself as having a singular origin. He was a pan-African, "his identity was diaspora, routed, multiple, motley, hybridized."[272] Youngquist compares Vassa to a DJ, a mixologist who spins samples from other artists to generate a performance that represents many different voices, yet signifies the unique identity of the mixologist. As a DJ, Vassa "mixed" a book. It became a performance text representing his brand of identity construction, and it was meant to circulate pan-Africanity to a global audience.

In his article on the subject of Afrofuturism and Janelle Monáe's influence on the music industry, Robert Loss argues, "Afrofuturism empowers by widening the lens of identity."[273] Examining identity within a pantechnological perspective validates the materiality of conceptual aspects of humanity. An Afrofuturist interrogation treats the intangible and ephemeral identity performances as a durable substance. One that behaves

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[271] Ibid., 182.
[272] Ibid., 188.
[273] Robert Loss, *PopMatters.*

like it has almost physical properties, in that it can be consumed, traded, and molded. Afrofuturism's management of identity "reconceptualizes how it fits in the larger pattern of meaning and power because a pantechnological perspective views identity not as a trait but as a tool that can be used for good or ill."[274]

As this dissertation is in the Africana Studies and Afrocentricity tradition, I first assume that my subjects, Truth and Monáe, possess agency -they can act from their cultural location to influence the world around them. Then, from an Afrofuturism and pantechnological perspective, I argue that Truth and Monáe employ Black womanhood as an instrument for a specific purpose. Their action constitutes a utilization of their Africana agency. I support my claim by examining the meaning and function of a few examples of their identity performance texts that an audience member may experience asynchronously.[275]

Textual Analysis

Truth and Monáe's identity performances have multiple meanings and may be interpreted differently depending on the day and audience. To analyze how Monáe and Truth operate their performance, I aim to uncover the multiple meanings that emerge in the interplay between Truth and Monáe, their identity, the social environment they inhabit, and the consumers of their identity performances. Textual analysis is the method I will use to uncover how Truth and Monáe construct and operate iconic and mythic

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[274] Beth Coleman, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 184-185.
[275] Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide.* (Thousand Oaks, CA; London: Sage Publications. 2003), 15.

Black womanhoods that effect Africana women's ability to change their own identity constructions.

Often used in Media Studies, Cultural Studies, and Mass Communication, but also employed in other humanities and social science disciplines, textual analysis is a method of qualitative research that "examines the content" of texts and assesses their "latent meaning."[276] It directs researchers to interrogate the construction, function, and impact of a *text*. As they are used in this textual analysis, texts are not limited to being just a compilation of written words; they can be any object that is interpreted for meaning. They are "synthetic, constructed, crafted, made up, invented sites of interpretation and disagreement, not fixed canons." [277] Texts can be "an image, or group of images, a sculpture, a film, a musical passage, or a sequence of sound effects." [278] For the purposes of this study, "performances [are] also considered as texts."[279] A distinctive attribute of texts is that they are *polysemic*; texts do not have a singular interpretation, they have multiple and varied meanings," that shift depending on social, political, historical, and personal contexts, and they can change over time. [280]

"Textual analysis is used to examine an author's use of language and discourse to depict certain ideas or opinions. It is an analytical method that prioritizes interpreting

[276] Sharon Lockyer, "Textual Analysis," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), 866; Spring-Serenity Duvall, "Textual Analysis," in *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*, ed. Mary Kosut, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 389.

[277] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle Edition.

[278] Ibid.

[279] Ibid.

[280] Sharon Lockyer, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 866.

connotative and denotative meanings within a text."[281] Textual analysis aims to understand the interpretations made about objects and ideas by using an array of perspectives and worldviews to uncover their value. If a researcher considers the multiple sources that store a text's various meanings, they could justify the significance of the production and consumption of certain ideas embedded within texts.

A criticism of textual analysis is that inquiry into the meaning of texts often pigeonholes analyses to focus on the text itself without recognizing the producer(s) and consumer(s) of the text.[282] Sharon Lockyer proposes that to combat this deficiency in textual analysis, the method should be combined "with [other] methods that explore the institutional constraints on the production of text and how audiences read the text."[283] Spring-Serenity Duvall suggests embedding textual analysis within a political framework that illuminates the environment outside of texts, so that relationships can be determined between a text and its social/cultural/historical realities. A political framework would guide a researcher in how they interpret a text using specific concepts, assumptions, and theories. For instance, feminist textual analysis identifies "dissonance in discursive formations of gender, race, sexuality, and class by exposing binary opposition in texts."[284] Instead of merely examining the meaning of a text in a vacuum, a feminist researcher would examine the relationship between the text and the socially constructed binary relationships, i.e. male/female, cis/queer, heterosexual/homosexual, etc. For this

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[281] Osizwe Eyidiyiye, "This Woman's Work: The Sociopolitical Activism of Bebe Moore Campbell." (dissertation, Temple University, 2011), 13.
[282] Sharon Lockyer, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 867.
[283] Sharon Lockyer, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 867.
[284] Spring-Serenity Duvall, "Textual Analysis," in *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*, ed. Mary Kosut, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 390.

dissertation, I resolve this limitation of textual analysis by using Afrocentricity as a political framework and Location Theory as an accompanying method.

Location Theory

> *In Afrocentricity, **location** takes precedence over the topic or data under consideration.*[285]

In Afrocentricity, a researcher has two primary assignments: to assume Africana agency, and to approach Africana phenomena from an Africana worldview. Both of these tasks require the researcher to understand the concept of *location*. Location is a term used to describe the connection between an individual's personal identity and their culture. Africologist Ama Mazama asserts that a fundamental assumption of location is that "one's history, culture, and biology determine one's identity."[286] Therefore, for an individual to be *located* means they practice their culture and conceive of themselves in a manner than is consistent with their "history, culture, and biology."[287] An individual whose performance of their identity exhibits a blatant distance from an Africana worldview is *dislocated*. "Dislocation occurs when a person understands reality from the perspective of another cultural group and/or they live on borrowed cultural terms."[288]

Location Theory is an approach to textual analysis from an Afrocentric framework that uses the concept of location, where a subject or idea sits in relationship to

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[285] Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity and Africology: Theory and Practice in the Discipline," in *African American Studies*, ed. Jeanette R. Davidson, (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburg University Press, 2010), 50. [emphasis added]

[286] Ama Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002): 25.

[287] Ibid.

[288] Ibid.

others, to "determine the degree in which an author performs a particular worldview."[289]

It is a process of examining the location of an author, and/or how an author culturally

positions their subject(s) of study. [290] From an Afrocentric position, the location of either

the author or the subject is a significant analytical element, because it demonstrates to the

researcher or the audience the "place where the authors' concepts, ideas, purposes, and

visions radiate."[291] To locate a text, a scholar would mine through a writer's words in a

particular essay or collection of works and extract clues to assess the extent that a writer

conveys a certain cosmology, epistemology, axiology, and ontology, i.e. worldview.

"From the writer's own textual expression, the Afrocentric critic is able to ascertain the

cultural and intellectual address of the author."[292]

Asante proposes that when conducting Location Theory, one should assess three

characteristics of an author: their language, attitude, and direction. [293] Language is "a

regularized code agreed upon by a community of users. It includes grammatical rules,

nuances, words, and deep systems."[294] An author may use language that clearly

references the norms of a specific culture, which would signal to a reader the worldview

to which they ascribe. Asante describes one indicator is the author's use of pejorative

language. "If one sees a reference to Africans as primitives or to Native Americans as 'a

bunch of wild Indians' or Latinos as 'greasy,' then one has an inclination of the cultural

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[289] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Howard Journal of Communications,* 98.
[290] Molefi Asante, "Location Theory and African Aesthetics," in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*, ed. Kariamu Weslsh-Asante, (Westport, CT: Praeger: 1993), 53.
[291] Ibid., 53.
[292] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Paradigm,* 238.
[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid.

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address of the author."[295] An author most likely would not refer to their own cultural group with such disparaging terms, therefore, it can be surmised, in this instance, that the author is not African, Native American, or Latino. Moreover, if they do practice some form of self-hatred, then the critic can assume the author's location is not confidently positioned within the worldview from which the author claims allegiance. Another indicator Asante mentions is the use of *sentinel statements* - a phrase or declaration, often found earlier in the text, that signals which worldview the author may be establishing as the lens from which to read the text. He posits, "if the author introduces his ideas with the statement 'Harvard is my home,'" [296] then, their juxtaposition of 'Harvard' and 'home' suggests a cultural grounding that may exist throughout the remaining text.

Attitude is "a predisposition to respond in a characteristic manner to some situation, value, idea, object, person, or group of persons."[297] Evaluating attitude is judging a writer's response to certain issues and phenomena as compared to a cultural groups' response. In the case of an Africana author, it would be gauging how the author's view on particular issues corresponds with an African worldview, or if the author uses Africana concepts and reasoning to reach their conclusions. For instance, if the subject were Harvard's discriminatory admission practices against Africana people, the critic would gather information to learn the heartbeat of the communities' opinion on the matter, and then ascertain from the text whether the author's opinion was aligned with or against the Africana communities.

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[295] Ibid., 239.
[296] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Howard Journal of Communications,* 98.
[297] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Paradigm,* 238.

Direction is "the line along which the author's sentiments, themes, and interests lie with reference to the point at which they are aimed."[298] It is the regularity of certain symbols and cultural markers in a text. If the author introduces her text with the statement, "Harvard is my home," then the critic would look at the presence of other cultural markers after that statement. She may start with Harvard, and end with the library of Timbuktu that would indicate a predilection towards Africa, or she may start with Harvard and end with American capitalism, which demonstrates a cultural leaning towards the United States.

Sometimes, concluding that an author or a phenomenon has an Afrocentric cultural address is challenging. Authors who are dislocated may exhibit a language and direction that points towards the author being located in the Africana worldview, but their attitude may appear European. In his analysis of Eddie Glaude's *Exodus*, Asante remarks that the book is odd.[299] *Exodus* is a discussion of Africans' adoption of the Exodus mythology as a rallying cry, and the resulting nationalism created from the existence of a common language of struggle. Glaude does attempt to describe the collective spirit of Africana people during a moment in history where it is often misrepresented that Africana people did not have a national outlook of an Africana community. Nevertheless, Asante argues that Glaude generalizes that all Africana people used "the analogy of the Jews of the Old Testament" in their religious and political thought when it was primarily only a few Blacks in the North"[300] and ignores the spirituality of over three million

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[298] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Paradigm,* 239-240.
[299] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Howard Journal of Communications,* 99.
[300] Ibid., 101.

Africans in the South who were not Christian. According to Asante, he "denies African agency to unite over their own culture and historic experiences and assumes too much reliance on the Biblical trope for the survival of Africans during the enslavement."[301] It is a more demanding task to identify a dislocated author who may use "sublime ideas to express concepts of Africana surrender, irresponsibility,[302] inaction, and submission.

In his many examples, Asante presents Location Theory as a method for examining literary texts. He demonstrates this application in his analyses of the poetry and stories of Henry Dumas,[303] Eddie Glaude's *Exodus,* and Manthia Diawara's *In Search of Africa*.[304] While Location Theory seems most appropriate for literary analysis, it has been used in other types of examinations. Nkrumahist Zizwe Poe asserts that a scholar can ascertain the "political location of an Africana person through their affiliations, self-identifications, nationalism, and stance of policy issues."[305] In his examination of Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-African agency, he uses both Nkrumah's theoretical works such as *Africa Must Unite*, and *Towards Colonial Freedom*, as well as his speeches, mission statements of organizations, and testimonials of African revolutionaries to argue the pan-African agency of Ghana's first president. Another example of a non-literary usage of Location Theory is Drew Brown's study of NFL prospects. Brown uses Location Theory to determine the cultural location of African American men who are/were recently drafted into the NFL. Using his interviews, he

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[301] Ibid., 100.
[302] D. Zizwe Poe, *Kwame Nkrumah's Contribution to Pan-Africanism an Afrocentric Analysis,* 20.
[303] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Paradigm,* 240-243.
[304] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 97.
[305] D. Zizwe Poe, *Kwame Nkrumah's Contribution to Pan-Africanism an Afrocentric Analysis,* 20.

assesses their distance from Africana conceptions of manhood, and European concepts of manhood.[306]

Similar to how Brown structured his study, I do not apply Location Theory to an analysis of literature; I use it instead to assess an African person's distance towards a liberation-based Africana technical agency. In other words, I evaluate the manner in which an Africana person uses technology to operate as an agent of Africana liberation, specifically in their identity performance. In my interrogation of Truth and Monáe's construction of reproducible revolutionary Black womanhoods, I use Location Theory, "to determine to what extent the creative productions of their identity represent the best traditions of Afrocentric resistance."[307] In examining various performance texts of Truth and Monáe ranging from books, songs, clothing, music videos, and photographs, I will use the three aspects Asante proposed for approaching a text using Location Theory: language, attitude, and direction, although, the process of evaluation will be slightly adjusted to account for the difference of analytical materials. Instead of mining through a writer's text for specific words and symbols, I will evaluate Truth and Monáe's cultural location by studying the presence of Afrocentric cultural forms, habits, and behaviors in their actions.[308]

Liberation Technology

"Africana people are the agents of their liberation"[309]

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[306] Drew Brown, "Drafting into Manhood: Black NFL Draft Prospects' Conceptions of Manhood and ideas of playing in the NFL." (dissertation, Temple University, 2015), 51.

[307] Molefi Asante, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*, 61.

[308] Ibid., 58.

[309] Marquita Pellerin, "Perceptions of African American Females: An Examination of Black Women's Images in Rap Music Videos." (dissertation, Temple University, 2011), 39.

Over the last 500 years, the varying institutions of "racism have prevented Africana people from amassing resources that would have made it possible for them to become masters of their own destiny."[310] The long history of European interactions with Africana peoples "involved a malicious deprecation of Africana culture and physiology"[311] which nurtured the belief that European/white American ideas are supreme and Africana ideas are inferior. It is an ideology that currently permeates the social institutions and personal opinions of nations dominated by Western thought, culture, political influence, and capital. In such an oppressive environment, Africana people are negatively affected by anti-Black racism and white supremacy to the point in which some Africana people accept being a subordinate caste, or they "embrace the superiority of White culture."[312] Because they cannot distance themselves from the lies of their oppressors, "most Africana people find themselves in a state of mental subjugation"[313] where they are impotent to (re)establish institutions and traditions that propagate Africana ways of being. White supremacy limited their "ability to create new cultural situations, and even new worlds consistent with their imagination."[314] The suppression of Africana people's agency is understood in Africana political and social thought to be "a measure to take away Africana freedom."[315]

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[310] Ronald Waters qtd in "David Lambert, "Black Atlantic Counterfactualism: Speculating about Slavery and its aftermath." Journal of Historical Geography 36 (2010) 286–296.

[311] Tommie Shelby, "Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity Or Common Oppression?" *Ethics* 112, no. 2 (2002): 255-56.

[312] Ibid.

[313] Mazama, 2003, 3

[314] Ronald Waters qtd in "David Lambert, "Black Atlantic Counterfactualism: Speculating about Slavery and its aftermath." Journal of Historical Geography 36 (2010) 286–296.

[315] Asante, Molefi Kete. "Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity." *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13 (2002): 98.

In response, Africana people take part in various efforts to resist the systems which oppress them, and "expose white cultural domination for the fraud that it is."[316] They participate in endeavors that aim to "end oppression, racial subordination, and inequality"[317] and redistribute the "instruments of societal development back to Africana people."[318] Africana people's primary objective is to achieve liberation, the freedom to develop their own cultural imperatives. In the struggle for liberation, Africana people must be agents of their own liberation. "They must participate, in a meaningful way, in freeing themselves because if their allies or non-Africana participants gave Africana people freedom, then they would not be producing a self-determined reality."[319] To liberate themselves, Africana people must affirm Africana culture, heritage, and creativity. [320] They must regain the power to represent their identity in various cultural forms as literature, film, music, theater, dance, humor, painting, sports, theology, modes of speech, dress, and hairstyle." [321] Africana liberation would require "possessing control over one's words and images in order to influence the cultivation of future ideas, and contributes towards the longevity of the culture."[322]

John Jennings proposes that under oppressive conditions, Africana people acquire knowledge and skills to operate varying technologies, both tangible and intangible, that assist them in achieving liberation. He states,

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[316] (Shelby 256).
[317] (shelby 232, 233)
[318] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, 41.
[319] (Shelby 258).
[320] (Shelby 232; 236).
[321] (Shelby 256).
[322] Julia Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, 146.

> *Throughout history, Black people, particularly oppressed Black people, have instantly noticed the affordances of various types of technology while under various forms of control. The most important affordances of these* **liberation technologies** *have always been freedom, equity, and agency.*[323]

Jennings puts forward the concept of liberation technology after using the pantechnological perspective to examine the tradition of Africana people's strivings to achieve freedom. He suggests that in dehumanizing moments such as enslavement and Jim Crow segregation, Africana people behave as technologists. They become intimately aware of the tools of the system that oppresses them, and they begin to generate and acquire instruments of which their function is to achieve "freedom, equity, and agency."[324] The tools they use include actions such as breaking farm equipment, revolt, using the judicial system, protest, changing into new clothes, and styling hair in a Northern fashion, etc. Using the term liberation technology classifies varying tactics, strategies, and implements as being effectual in placing Africana people on the path to liberation.

Frequently cited examples of a liberation technology, are the work songs and spirituals that enslaved Africans sang while they worked on plantations. While spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "We Shall All be Free," appeared to demonstrate Africana adoption of Christianity, these songs also functioned as a type of communication technology that kept Africana people informed about various strategies to achieve freedom. Words that came up in spirituals, "such as 'heaven,' 'the river,' and 'home,' were codes for geographic locations of where to meet to plan a revolt or to

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[323] Jennings qtd in Robert Loss, *PopMatters*. [emphasis in original]
[324] Ibid.

escape to the North."[325] Harriet Tubman used spirituals as a security system when she guided groups of enslaved Africans to freedom. She "would sing an appropriate spiritual to warn her party of an impending threat to their safety. When the road was clear, she would change the words or the tempo of the song and guide them on to the next safe place."[326]

The way that Jennings mentions liberation technologies suggests that they are generated from Africana agents surviving in oppressive conditions, and Africana agents' culturally derived aptitude for reading and creating technologies; however, Jennings' definition of liberation technologies does not appear to be a complete explanation of the meaning and function of the concept. He uses it as a brief adjective to modify his meaning of the pantechnological perspective. Instead of simply using his definition, I hack the meaning of liberation technology to expand its usefulness as a classifying tool and connotation in Afrofuturism discourse. In hacking the definition, I prioritize African agency and take into account the entirety of the African experience.

The significance of agency and the technological literacy of Africana people are two important ideas to deconstruct from Jennings' liberation technology concept. First, Jennings assumes that Africana people can affect their social development even under oppressive conditions. Africana people continually generate cultural manifestations for themselves and their social development, as well as construct a "challenge to racist

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[325] E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures." in *Performance Studies Handbook*, eds. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 453.

[326] Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promise Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*. 1st edition. (New York: Ballantine, 2004), 101.

assumptions about their creative abilities."[327] Oppression does not preclude Africana

people from reproducing epistemological or material goods that communicate Africana

culture. When examining Africana agency, an Africana Studies researcher should never

assume that an African agent has lost the ability to act in his/her culture's best interest.

Asante asserts, "[Scholars] can argue about the degree to which Africans are weak or

strong agents, but there should not be any question that agency exists."[328] Academic

disciplines based off the European philosophical tradition often attempt to dismiss the

agency of Africana people. Western-trained historians who research the enslavement

period can dismiss Africana agency, and chronicle the era by recording the transportation

of bodies. Conversely, agency is an immutable characteristic of Africana people in

Africana Studies. In particular, an Afrocentric scholar should be able to address the

technological agency of an Africana agent in any ear, since technological agency is just a

category of agential expression.

Second, Jennings asserts that Africana people have an aptitude for technological

manipulation. He mentions that Black people "instantly notice" how a tool can assist

them in achieving their goals. They can deduce the function of an instrument in which

they come in contact, and hack the technology for their own purposes. Beth Coleman

defines this ability as *technological agency*. It "speaks to the ways by which Africana

people use material, abstract, and spiritual devices to navigate the terrain in which they

live."[329] Anti-Black racism fueled many of the assumptions that Europeans were

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[327] bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance.* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 211.
[328] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*, 41
[329] Beth Coleman, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 177.

inherently technologists and African people were technologically ignorant. Externally

defined myths about Africana people's technological agency "regulated the trajectory of

discussions about how Africana people consume and use technology, and concealed why

they produce meanings for technological artifacts, practices, and knowledge that

regularly subvert the constructed meanings of dominant manifestations of European

technology."[330] EDMs claimed that Africana people had no technological agency, and

only received some sense of technological advancements after they were "civilized" by

Europeans. Moreover, these myths obscured the history of Africana technological

agency. Africana people have been involved in technological knowledge construction

since before the era of pyramids. They developed guilds and secret societies dedicated to

technological education. Moreover, Africana people had their own cultural institutions to

impart technological literacy amongst their community. This investment by Africana

people in their technological agency is what I refer to as their Ogunic heritage.

Ogun is an orisha, a deity of the Yoruba[331] spiritual system. He is associated with

the element iron, and therefore he has dominion over most tools and institutions (axes,

hoes, guns, hunting, and military to name a few) that benefit African civilizations. The

metal iron[332] has been manipulated for millennia in many western Africana societies.

"Archaeologists have found evidence of the production and usage of iron around what is

now Nigeria dating to the 2nd century BC, and reaching back to the middle of the second

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[330] Rayvon Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 641.

[331] Yoruba is a cultural group in Western Africa, a majority of its people are located in the country known contemporarily as Nigeria. The spiritual system of its people, is known as either Yoruba, Aborisha, and even sometimes Ifa, is comprised of history, tradition, and concepts of the Yoruba people.

[332] The word *ogun* translates to mean iron in many African cultures. It can be argued that people believing in the spiritual nature of iron led to its deification, which subsequently resulted in the orisha having the same name as the element with which it is associated. Though, to assume that western African societies were paying homage solely to the physical object itself diminishes the complexity of their spiritual system/philosophy.

millennium BC."[333] As iron developed into an essential tool of society, manufacturing iron involved remembering and perpetuating the many steps and ingredients involved. Villages dedicated to the smelting and forging of iron, "songs sung to honor the ancestral technologists and inventors,"[334] and rituals to venerate Ogun created an environment that deeply ingrained iron's, and by extension, technology's, importance. Even the institution of African kingship was used to foster within African society a way understand the significance of technological agency in their social hierarchy. In many versions of the epic tale of Sundiata, a thirteenth-century Malian emperor, a part of the narrative details how young Sundiata learns how to walk after being born lame. Sundiata requests the local blacksmiths to create an iron staff. When he grasps the staff, he is able to walk, but he also bends the staff. "This event is usually interpreted as symbolic of how Sundiata's command of technology, nurturing of economic productivity, and military prowess would guarantee his success as a ruler."[335] The tale of Sundiata was passed down for generations by dieji, oral historians of African history. Through the retelling of Sundiata, Africana people understood the interconnection between leadership and technology; and by extension, that technological agency is necessary for a strong leader and therefore, society's stability.

When Ogun is venerated in Yoruba society, it is through rituals that remind the Yoruba people of the relationship between humanity, technology, and social development. At festivals or other cultural events, actors brandish swords and other iron instruments in symbolic plays that represent issues that affect the future trajectory of the community such as war, or kingship. In such public displays, Yoruba people are regularly

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[333] Florence Okoye, "Does Africa Dream of Androids?" *Disability and the Global South* 1, no. 1. (2014): 68

[334] Florence Okoye, *Disability and the Global South,* 69.

[335] Jonathan Reynolds, "Sundiata, Malinke Hero." In *World History Encyclopedia*. Edited by Alfred J. Andrea. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011.

exposed to the ethics of humanity's use of technology, and they are reminded that they are the creators of their technology, and thus the creators of their future. In the diaspora, the veneration of Ogun teaches his adherents that they must be cautious about how they utilize it because technology is both *beneficial and dangerous*. Ogun's name is invoked when a practitioner of Yoruba uses certain implements. An example is during Lùkùmí initiation rituals, where initiates may get their hair shaved, and symbols are painted upon their head. Before cutting the hair, the priests sing an oríkì- a ritual poem- to Ogun. "All knives tied to knives honor the head of power/ Counted to become old with honor /Ogun is the one who gave us the razor/ We have the authority(medicine) to become old with honor."[336] Acknowledging Ogun in such a way demonstrates that scissors, and other such instruments deserve respect if they are to be used to assist humans in living. Disrespecting technology, and thereby disrespecting Ogun, may lead to at best, individual death, and at worst, social chaos.

A more commonplace veneration of Ogun occurs when Africana people call upon him to ask for safe passage in vehicles and to fix certain technologies like computers and cellphones. Africana graffiti writers honor Ogun by placing offerings on train tracks or wearing sacred jewelry emblematic of the orisha, because they make their art on the subway trains, which are also part of his domain. "[337] Graffiti Writer EZO attended a Santeria ceremony where Ogun possessed one of the attendees. Ogun told EZO, "if you run in my domain, you must wear this anklet." EZO mentions that after that moment,

> *I had a lot of accidents on the train tracks, from being electrocuted, from falling of a cat walk, from getting hit over the head with a pistol by a police officer…Ogun saved my ass many times while I was on the train tracks. When you run around train tracks, you're going to experience*

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[336] Jason Mason, "Ògún: Builder of the Lùkùmí's House" In *Africa's Ogun : Old World and New.* ed. Sandra Barnes. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997. 362.

[337] Ivor Miller, *Aerosol kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 93.

some stuff.[338]

The veneration of Ogun reinforces a practice of remembrance, respect, and responsibility of the processes and consequences of technological usage. It serves as a cultural education that instills a technological grammar and literacy with Africana people and gives them the tools in which to employ their technological agency. In preserving this Ogunic heritage over the years, Africana people have retained a long history of reading the potential capabilities of objects and utilizing them as tools in order to bring about positive Africana social development.

From this Ogunic heritage, it can be assumed that Africana people have always been technologists for their own benefit. Moreover, they have a legacy of tool construction that originates from their spiritual and philosophical tradition. Although Africana people can generate a multitude of tools for a variety of purposes, across many eras, not all tools are used to achieve liberation. Some tools may be used during times of oppression, but they may not foster liberation, (such as soul food). Others may be used to further Africana society during times of relative peace, and not during times of oppression (such as the pyramids). Liberation technologies are a product of the technological agency of Africana people. They are tools used during periods where Africana people are oppressed, for the purposes of ending white cultural domination, and/or affirming Africana culture. Specifically, I propose that liberation technologies are spiritual, emotional, physical, and/or intellectual instruments, constructed and/or wielded by Africana agents. Liberation technologies function to emancipate Africana people from

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[338] Ibid., 94.

physical and metaphoric chains that bind them from (re)producing their cultural imperatives. Africana agents can hack archaic and non-Africana technologies or construct new instruments to function as devices that augment Africana agents' potential to struggle for liberation. These constructed or "hacked" tools should amplify the agential capabilities and capacities of Africana people and their descendants, and contribute to Africana agents fulfilling their ancestral obligation to nurture, protect, and maintain Africana society.

Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe

Afrofuturist women get a kick out of rewiring their audiences.[339]

In their respective times, Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe assert their self-made, iconic, and revolutionary identities for popular consumption to provide identifiable devices that aid in liberating other Africana women from the EDMs of Black womanhood. Within two different eras of anti-Black sentiment, Truth and Monáe unapologetically performed Black womanhoods that validated the humanity of Africana women, and inspired others to recognize their performances as innovative, but reproducible. I examine the mechanics of their performance texts as a means to understand the specific culturally derived strategies and tactics they used to transgress stereotypes, and perform Black womanhood from an Africana worldview. I argue that Truth and Monáe transmit revolutionary notions through their performance texts with the

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[339] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

purpose to stimulate Africana women to recognize their creative capacity to construct and perform their own culturally rooted identities.

My intent is not to present Truth and Monáe as examples of "good," static, archetypes. Conversely, I present their actions as a set of guidelines that enable Africana women to maintain fluid, transformative identities centered on Africana culture and ideals. I wish to demonstrate that Truth and Monáe established themselves, not as the 'exemplars of Black womanhood,' but as agents who encourage Africana women to assume liberatory Africana women identities.

Isabella Baumfree was an Africana woman who experienced the terrorism of enslavement in New York State during the early 19th century. A decade after her emancipation, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth and traveled around the northeast as a preacher who aimed to "declare the truth to the people."[340] While sojourning across the Northeast and Midwest United States, she advocated for the emancipation of enslaved Africans and women's suffrage. After the Civil War, she lobbied for equal rights, fair wages, and resettlement for the newly freed Africana people. Truth made her place in history by being active in both the abolitionist and women suffrage movements in the United States. She is one of the earliest known and notable Black women activists.

Truth has become a classic representation of Black womanhood. During the early days of the reclamation of Black history and women's history in the 1960s and 1970s – and the eventual development of Black Women's Studies in the 1980s, Truth stood as a

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[340] Sojourner Truth qtd in Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl." *The Atlantic*. April 9, 1863. Accessed September 16, 2015. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1863/04/sojourner-truth-the-libyan-sibyl/308775/.

prominent figure representing the enduring plight of African Americans and women in a racist and sexist America. Africana people use Truth's imagery as a direct challenge to stereotypes of Black womanhood. They depict her as an ideal example of Africana womanhood in the multiple phases of Black activism: she is a symbol of revolutionary activism, Black feminism, or unwavering strength depending on who telling her story, and in what context. Her infamous 1851 address at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" is praised as an early example of intersectionality discourse. The phrase itself is often used as a title of Black Women Studies texts, such as, Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, and bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. Even in popular media, Truth occupies a noteworthy location. Her image resides on t-shirts, buttons, tote bags, and United States postal stamps. In 2009, a sculpture of her was placed in the United States Capital.[341]

Sojourner Truth is iconic; She is a recognizable and reproducible subject, in which a "simple invocation of her name or image is sufficient to call up a host of ideas and assumptions about who she was and what she stood for."[342] Her 1850 autobiography was the first creative production that circulated the story of Truth to a national audience. She spoke about her life during conventions and speaking engagements, but her book became an artifact for a person to replay what they heard for their own sake, or for others. As Truth traveled, she sold her narrative as a way to make a living, and it served to

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[341] "Explore Capitol Hill." Sojourner Truth Bust. Accessed January 27, 2015. http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/busts/sojourner-truth-bust.

[342] Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: New Press, 2007), 6.

spread a discourse of Africana liberation, but also Africana women's social and political thought. Her photographs are another device that fostered Truth's national recognition. During speaking engagements in the 1860s and 70s, Truth sold 2.5x3 inch photographs of herself and advertised their sale in newspapers. These photographs were one of the few images of a free Black woman that widely circulated in both white audiences and Africana communities in antebellum and post-war America. Across the nation, people viewed a realistic portrait of an Africana woman who (at the time) was neither a slave, nor a servant to white people. Her photographs operated as a means for Truth to be economically sustained, but they also challenged the negative symbols embedded in the viewing of an Africana woman's body. In contrast to the images of Africana women sitting in the background to a white family, or Africana people, undressed, showing their physical scars of enslavement, Truth sits in the frame without any obvious markers of enslavement or Black inferiority. Instead, her Africana features are juxtaposed next to symbols of gentile womanhood, such as knitting needles and flowers that were not often associated with an Africana woman. Her photograph forces her viewers to read Africana women like humans, therefore, teaching American society a new visual language in which to interrogate Africana womanhood. Truth sold hundreds of these images in her lifetime, and they were subsequently published in books and newspapers. Truth became an identifiable image, as did her message of Africana liberation and civil rights.

I argue that Truth intentionally performed an identity that would enable Africana women and others to revise how they "*read*" Black womanhood. Before she lectured for Africana and women's rights, Truth made herself into a performable icon. She became

Sojourner Truth in order to perform her identity like a storyteller, or *djeli*. [343] She

navigates public space 'in character' in order to communicate to her audience a

politically motivated story about an ex-slave Africana woman activist,[344]" for the purpose

of enlightenment, entertainment and the continuation of cultural traditions."[345] Using her

alter ego of the storyteller, Truth developed and reproduced an icon that was recognizable

in both Africana and white circles in order to generate an alternative visual vocabulary of

Africana women. Before the existence and proliferation of "modern" stereotypes like

Mammy and Jezebel, Sojourner Truth made herself into a powerful symbol that upheld

the humanity of Africana women, and assisted them in the process of liberation from

externally-defined mythologies that cast them as grotesque, property, and sexual. I

examine the history of Truth's cartes-de-viste, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850)*

and the *Book of Life* (1875), to show that Truth's actions originate from an Africana

cultural center. From that location, she employs her identity performance as a liberation

technology for Africana people.

     Janelle Monáe is a singer, songwriter, and producer, raised in Kansas City,

Kansas by working-class parents. As a teenager, she traveled to Atlanta to jumpstart her

music career. There, she met her colleagues Nate Wonder and Chuck Lightening, and

together they formed the artist collective, Wondaland. After the group produced Monáe's

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[343] In western Africana cultures, A djeli is a historian who is called upon to publically perform narratives about events and people in African history. "The intellectual culture they represented included oral-historical and musical tradition, as well as governance, medicine, and agriculture. They were responsible for the memory and genealogy of their society." Joshua Myers, "Reconceptualizing Intellectual histories of Africana Studies: A Review of the Literature." (Dissertation, Temple University, 2013), 337.

[344] Julia Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, 30.

[345] Leslie Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation," (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009),16.

first album, she began selling it on the streets of Atlanta and through social media. Eventually, Monáe signed a record contract with Bad Boy and Atlantic Records that launched her music career.

Critics refer to her sound as a "fus [ion] of many musical genres"[346] of Black music. She draws inspiration from rock, funk, R&B, blues, etc. to create musical concoctions that make her music timeless and avant-garde. The content of Monáe's songs is a generous mix of political commentary and Afrofuturism. She mixes lyrics about police brutality and stereotypes and juxtaposes it with imagery of robots and time travel. Her aesthetic is also frequently mentioned in reviews about her work. Monáe only wears outfits that consist of the colors: black, white, and at times, red, and often styles her hair in a pompadour (reminiscent of entertainer James Brown during the 1950s and 60s). She is most known for her donning a classic suit with a black jacket, white shirt, black pants, and black tie. When asked about her choice in clothing, Monáe claims that she wears a uniform as a way to pay homage to her working class heritage. Her mother, who made her living as cleaning person, would be required to wear a uniform to work. Monáe feels like the practice of wearing a consistent outfit places her in the same social situation as her parents and many other members of the Africana community. Others have interpreted her clothing to be a tribute to Motown artists who wore suits when they performed, or a challenge to the social expectations of female R&B artists to be sex symbols and wear clothing that accentuates their breasts and butt. Her sartorial choices are a large aspect of her identity performance. She purposefully uses her clothing as text to reinforce her

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[346] Robert Loss, *PopMatters.*

message of revolutionary Black womanhood. In particular, she wears her classic suit as a visual marker to demonstrate her reverence to a Black aesthetic and to invoke the visual cues of Black oratorical leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In her suit, she becomes a preacher. Monáe, through her unique style choices, has begun to alter the aesthetic practices of Africana women. Africana women wear Monáe "costumes" at Halloween, other celebratory events, and in their everyday lives. They put their natural hair in pompadours, or wear Black and white suits with saddle shoes. They emulate Monáe's identity performance to show appreciation for her artistry, but putting on a "Monáe" signifies Africana women's confidence in performing an identity that uplifts their own culture, and challenges EDMs.

Figure 6: M. Sanders November 5, 2012[347]

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[347] http://blackgirllonghair.com/2012/11/recreating-janelle-monae/

In lyrics and music videos, Monáe weaves together the story of her mythic character, Cindi Mayweather. Mayweather is an android built for entertainment; "[She] is literally a mechanical construction composed for the usefulness of others."[348] Her story begins when Mayweather falls in love with a human, which is illegal in the fictional city of Metropolis. Because she does not believe her emotions are wrong, she realizes the injustices of the law, and becomes politically conscious. Eventually, the authorities capture Mayweather and sentence her to be disassembled. Before they can take her apart, she escapes. As a fugitive, she begins to fight for equal rights for her fellow androids and all other oppressed beings. Over four albums, Monáe developed a folktale of Mayweather as a method to transmit culturally relevant ideas of revolution, love, freedom, and self-knowledge to the millions of people. Mayweather behaves like a comic book superhero character for the marginalized. She behaves as a "socialization mechanism"[349] that advances an Africana womanhood that is community-oriented, and liberation-inclined. Africana women can identify with Mayweather in a way they would not be able to with characters such as Superman or Batman.[350] They do not have to feel a sense of cognitive dissonance when they attempt to emulate the values of white male superheroes. With

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[348] Robert Loss, *PopMatters.*
[349] Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!': A Critical Analysis of the mythology and culture significance of Black Superheroes." *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation.* eds. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald Jackson II, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 227.
[350] Superman is a comic book character created in 1933 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. He is an alien from the planet Krypton who was sent to earth to became its protector. Batman was created in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. He is a multimillionaire who fights crime with gadgets and his intelligence. They both are most popularly depicted as white men.

Mayweather as their savior, Africana women can begin to free themselves to be more than narrowly defined caricatures of Black womanhood.[351]

In this study, I analyze the cultural address of Monáe's style and folktale through her music videos, albums, web presence (sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, jmonae.com, and wondaland.com), and various interviews. In interrogating Monáe's public image for its Africana attitude, language, and direction, I argue that Monáe operates her identity like a liberation technology. She uses two of her performance texts: her clothing style, and the folktale of Cindi Mayweather, as the mediums that negotiate her unique Africana womanhood with the world. In addition to influencing what type of African womanhood she presents on a grand scale, Monáe intentionally makes her performance texts imitable, so that Africana women are not only influenced to perceive Africana womanhood differently, but they are compelled to wear it differently.

Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe are the subjects of my research because they are "weird" Africana women. I use the term 'weird' to suggest that they both exhibit behaviors that are considered socially awkward, or contrary to the norms of both Black and mainstream American social conventions. Their innovation appears eccentric, and "they don't fit neatly into any movement or the history of the times without a healthy dose of explanation."[352] For instance, Monáe wears a monochromatic color scheme, although most people in the world wear a variety of colors. Her choice of wearing a suit, as much as it can be read as "cool," can be interpreted as nerdy. With her "high water"

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[351] Robert Loss, *PopMatters.*
[352] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Kindle Edition.

pants, saddle shoes, and suspenders Monáe mirrors the fashion traits of Steve Urkel, not

his suave alter ego Stefan Urquelle.[353] She uses a serious tone when she says she only

dates androids, because she expects her audience to accept her claim that autonomous

cybernetic human-like organisms exist, and they are 'dating material.'[354] Neither her

clothing nor her philosophy has been described in mainstream society as "normal."

Monáe acknowledges that her audience perceives her as unconventional. In the lyrics to

the song "Q.U.E.E.N.," she asks, "will your God accept me in my black and white? Will

he approve the way I'm made? Or should I reprogram, deprogram, and get down?"[355]

Monáe is not fazed when she is labelled as quirky, because she establishes being weird as

part of her tactic to motivate people to embrace differences, even if it makes them

uncomfortable.

During her time, Truth was described as a great orator, a wise woman, yet many

people described her behaviors and mannerisms as peculiar. Truth was thought to be an

odd choice for a speaker in anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements because of

her, speech, physical characteristics and rhetorical style. Most of the commentary on

Truth's style mentioned her dialect, which was a blend of English, Dutch, and African

vernaculars. When she spoke, her accent coupled with her Africana skin unsettled

listeners who expected a formerly enslaved individual to have a Southern Africana

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[353] Christine Quail "Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television."
Television & New Media 12, no. 5. (2011): 460–463.
    "Steve Urkel (played by Jaleel White) is a character from the sitcom *Family Matters* (ABC,
1989–97; CBS, 1997–98), a show about a Black working-class family. He was the nerdy next-door
neighbor, and one of the most popular characters on the show. Urkel is the spitting image of nerddom: thick
glasses, high-pitched voice, suspenders, and floods [pants whose legs end above the ankles]."
[354] Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." *Rolling Stone*. June 30, 2010. Accessed
January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.
[355] "Q.U.E.E.N." *The Electric Lady*. 2013.

dialect. This is most apparent in Harriet Beecher Stowe's essay about Sojourner Truth, "Thy Libyan Sybil," where Stowe just misrepresents Truth's actual speech patterns, and instead depicts her with a stereotypical "southern Black broken English," using terms like "Honey," "I reckon." Truth submitted a correction to Stowe's portrayal, stating, "I never make use of the word honey."[356] Truth was renowned for her physical characteristics; she was a six feet tall dark skinned woman, and paired with her low voice gave many reporters the impression that she was a man. At her speaking engagements, she would sing her own compositions, and often she made her audiences laugh by doing impressions or relating observations about the absurdity of racism and sexism. In regards to her personal life, Truth was a smoker for most of her life, and was known to tell a dirty joke.[357] If she lived in contemporary times, she would be considered a "hipster," due to her political views and counter-culture lifestyle. She enjoyed living in communes that attempted eccentric practices at the time, such as living in racially integrated communities. She experimented with different diets, including fasting. She even was a proponent of holistic healthcare, such as hydropathy,[358] and John Harvey Kellogg,[359] was her physician before she died.

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[356] Sojourner Truth, "Letter from Sojourner Truth." *Commonwealth*, June 17, 1863.

[357] Margert Washing, 233.

[358] "Science Museum. Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine." Hydropathy. Accessed October 25, 2015.
    "A procedure where patients are given cold water 'wraps' using wet sheets for several hours at a time, in order to sweat out the 'poisons' of their particular disease."

[359] Howard Markel, "John Harvey Kellogg and the Pursuit of Wellness." *JAMA* 305, no. 17 (2011): 1814-5.
    "John Harvey Kellogg was a skilled surgeon and public health expert, at his Battle Creek Sanitarium he combined modern medicine, surgery, and bacteriology with an eclectic blend of hydropathy, vegetarianism, exercise, and spiritual uplift."

Truth and Monáe's performances of their identity do not mirror assumptions about "proper" marginalized Black women."[360] They do not conform to typical or popular practices of Africana womanhood. Truth and Monáe exemplify intersectionality when they challenge their audiences to read and comprehend the meaning of overlooked traits: such as their meaning-making ability, style, performance text production, etc. in relation to their identity performances. Their distinctive characteristics are depicted in conjunction with their cultural and gender identity. Because Truth and Monáe are "unusual or special in some way," [361] one can observe their unconventional approach to problems, in order to derive original and inventive solutions. Analyzing their experiences can uncover alternative ways of thinking about the common problems of Africana people.

I propose that Truth and Monáe both perform their identities as liberation technologies. They employ their performance texts to challenge EDMs of Black womanhood, by constructing performance texts that amplify Africana women's agential capacities. They consciously operate their identity performances as devices that subliminally train Black women to read and perform variable forms of Black womanhood. This education through symbols liberates the mental barriers which block Africana women from being complete agents. They cannot act fully from their cultural center – a necessity for Africana liberation. [362]

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[360] Julia Jordan-Zachery, "Blogging at the Intersections: Black Women, Identity, and Lesbianism." Politics & Gender 8, no. 3 (September 2012): 407.

[361] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 2nd ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 169.

[362] Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto,* 14.

AFROFUTURISM AND AFRICANA WOMEN

In 2013, Africologist Antwanisha Alameen conducted an analysis comparing Kemetic and Igbo women's methods of exerting their political agency. In her study, she argued that in order to conduct an Afrocentric analysis of Africana women, a researcher "must centralize African women's experiences by locating the avenues where they exercised agency."[363] Alameen touches on a significant issue in Africana Studies regarding the study of women. When examining phenomena with the perspective of keeping Africana agency at the center of analysis, agency is often interpreted as a derivation of the whole of Africana culture, i.e. Africana people act from their cultural center. What is often assumed, but not directly addressed, is that intersectional differences between individuals affect the appearance and style of agential ability.

The social construction of the female gender in Africana societies, organizations, and groups impacts how women participate in their society and cultivate African realities. Most aspects of Africana women's agency do intersect with the agency of Africana men; however, the genders experience some activities differently. These differences influence the manner in which Africana women express their own agency. Analyzing African women's phenomena and centering their agency would require a researcher to consider what affects Africana women's practice of agency and how Africana women's actions affect their environment. An analysis of Africana agency must ground itself in the cultural and historical specificity of the agent. Similarly, an analysis of an Africana woman's agency should consider her womanhood in its investigation.[364]

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[363] Antwanisha Alameen, "Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland: A Critical Study" (dissertation, Temple University, 2013), 39 & 41.

[364] Yaba A. Blay, "All the 'Africans' are Men, All the 'Sistas' are 'American,' but Some of Us Resist: Realizing African Feminism(s) as an Africological Research Methodology." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008): 69.

Asante addresses how gender should be approached in Afrocentric analyses when he states,

> women are considered an equal participant in Africana phenomenological development. In the Afrocentric project, the researcher must properly examine the roles women have played in liberating Africans from oppression and subjugation, and exercising economic and political authority. [365]

It is a noble objective to rectify the veiling of African women's experiences in patriarchal histories and examinations of Africana people by approaching Africana women as equal participants in the development of Africana society, history, and epistemology. Studying the agency of Africana women and centralizing their experiences is a necessary and restorative project within Africana Studies.

I argue that Afrofuturism is a relevant and valid perspective for approaching Africana women's phenomena. It is a lens that directs analysis towards how and why Africana people act, and then it employs those models to generate and reclaim an Africana past, present, and future. Specifically, Afrofuturism operates as a theoretical perspective that interrogates Africana women's experiences and phenomena using the cultural and historical specificity of Africana women agents, particularly their solutions to oppressive conditions and ideations about human progress. It utilizes Africana women's knowledges and praxes to generate methods and methodologies for Africana social development and liberation.

Afrofuturist's concepts emanate from Africana experiences and creations, and Africana women's ideas and artistry have supplied a large portion of the repository of contemporary Afrofuturism. The works and accomplishments of Octavia Butler, Madame C.J. Walker, Mae Jamison, Nnedi Okorafor, Alondra Nelson, Janelle Monáe, and others have saturated the construction and practice of Afrofuturism with Africana woman-

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[365] Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 9-10.

oriented knowledges and techniques. The study of Africana women's speculative and technological agency unveils the plethora and diversity of their critical thought, "thereby attributing Africana women with philosophical vision and authority."[366] For instance, novelist Nalo Hopkinson generates an alternative vocabulary for science fictional technological items that stem from Africana cultures. In constructing her narratives, she contemplates what would be the intent of science fictional devices that an "African diasporic culture might build."[367] Then, she chooses culturally significant labels that her composite futuristic Africana society might use to represent how they interpret the relationship between themselves and their technology. Hopkinson proposes that Africana people would read an omniscient artificial intelligence system that monitors the feelings and actions of individuals differently than European cultures. Instead of the Orwellian term "Big Brother" that conjures up images of an impersonal patriarchal figure controlling through fear, in her work *Midnight Robber*, she names the artificial intelligence 'Granny Nanny,' after the Jamaican revolutionary Nanny of the Maroons.

Granny Nanny is

> *an artificial intelligence that safeguards all the people in her planetary system… She uses the 'Nansi Web as the grid and glue for her community. As woman-warrior and spider of her web, Granny Nanny is community-centered, responsive, and in dialogue with those she surrounds.*[368]

Hopkinson "retrieves Africana women from the margins," and presents knowledge production and acquisition as a feminine essence. She disrupts white and masculine tropes of technological alienation, and portrays an all-knowing artificial intelligence as a force that "ensures harmony, security, health, and freedom from outside oppression."[369]

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[366] Shana L Redmond, "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War."" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 4 (2011): 393.

[367] Alondra Nelson, *Social Text*, 11.

[368] Jillana Enteen, "On the Receiving End of the Colonization: Nalo Hopkinson's 'Nansi Web." *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2, (July, 2007): 275; Nalo Hopkinson, "A Conversation with Nalo Hopkinson." SF Site. May 5, 2007. Accesed September 1, 2015. http://www.sfsite.com/03b/nh77.htm.

[369] Jillana Enteen, *Science Fiction Studies,* 271.

Hopkinson uses to her fiction to draw attention to Africana derived ideas and names, as a way to highlight speculations about Africana usage and creation of future technologies that both empower and inspire Africana people.

Novelist Octavia Butler writes speculative stories with complex Africana women characters and "consistently centers (or creates) a variety of experiences from across the Diaspora." In her fiction, her characters "critique conventional systems of power and dominance" by practicing aspects of Africana women's social power such as cooperation and egalitarian ethics.[370] The novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* both chronicle the story of Lauren Olamina, who lives in a post-apocalyptic United States Olamina "dedicates her life to building *Earthseed* communities that are havens from a brutal world."[371] "The essentials of Earthseed are to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit the community, family, and self, and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny, which is for humanity to root among the stars."[372] The practices and philosophies of Butler's protagonist reflects the strategies passed down through numerous generations of Africana women that function as solutions to oppression and dehumanization. Butler's vision of community building based on the tradition of Africana women managing their societies is utilized today in creating strategies for transformative justice.[373] One may reveal the sankofic quality in Africana women's agential activities when analyzing Africana women's practices and ideations.

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[370] Susana M Morris, *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly,* 155; Antwanisha Alameen, "Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland: A Critical Study" (dissertation, Temple University, 2013), 163.

For instance, in Igbo culture, "Women's organizations such as the Umuada Azuonuk operated as a unified group, and served as a support system for all women. If a problem arose, the women would call a meeting to come up with a collective resolution."

[371] Kristin Anne McGarity, *In Memoriam Octavia Butler: for Chorus, Orchestra, and Speaker* (dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2009), 139.

[372] Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (London: The Women's Press, 1995), 240.

[373] Walidah Imarisha, Adrienne M. Brown, and Sheree R. Thomas, eds. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015.

With Afrofuturism driving the direction of this analysis, I study how Truth and Monáe use their identity performance to challenge and transgress externally defined myths of Black womanhood. In examining the ways in which Truth and Monáe perform Black womanhood, I argue that they operate their identity performance like a technology. They use it to extend their human ability to communicate an Africana woman epistemology that forces a rupture in people's adherence to the mythologies of Black women. The manner in which Truth and Monáe utilize their identity performance technologies resembles the Africana cultural concepts of storytelling and folktale. They create characters and stories as a way to amplify other Africana women's agential abilities. Their use of identity as a liberation technology offers another insight into the history of Africana women's resistance to white cultural domination.

In using an Afrofuturist perspective, I uncover how Truth and Monáe's epistemological and material creations operate as potentially useful to Africana social development. This type of analysis of their action and use of imagination opens pathways for other interpretations of Africana knowledge. Moreover, it adds to the toolbox of Africana liberation.

CHAPTER 3: SOJOURNER TRUTH

Sojourner Truth is one of the most recognizable 19th century Africana women in the contemporary era. A reason for her current reputation is partially due to her portrait being reproduced onto various accoutrements and media. Internet memes, performance art pieces, tote bags, "t-shirts, postcards, lapel buttons, postage stamps, etc. have contributed to Sojourner Truth's visual omnipresence as the embodiment of Black womanhood."[374] Many Africana people "recognize her face and glean certain political implications from it, while most of her contemporaries' have been forgotten."[375] . Truth's imagery and message endures in the Africana community as a symbol of pride, intelligence, and activism for Africana people. An individual can wear an image of Truth as a way to demonstrate their support of Africana woman causes. [376]

Historian Nell Painter questions how a formerly enslaved Africana woman who was illiterate and, for most of her life, impoverished, remains such a legendary figure in the 21st century. Very little is known about her direct actions within abolitionist or women's suffrage organizations, and there are almost no sources that indicate her thoughts or feelings on issues other than what she spoke about in public forums. Truth did not publish her own speeches, nor did she publish a collection of her works. Truth's popularity does not hinge upon her being a leader of a movement, because, for the most part, she is an elusive figure. Little information exists about Truth outside of her identity performance texts. Truth established her identity, and provided her community with

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[374] Nell Irwin Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 273.
[375] Nell Irwin Painter, "Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic" *Gender & History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 3.
[376] Ibid.

everything they know about her. I argue that Truth is an enduring icon because she meticulously managed her identity for the purpose of making "Sojourner Truth" into a myth, i.e. "an Africana utterance embedded with a message that explains the human condition or examines the question of existence in a racist society."[377] Truth, in essence, was a storyteller in the Africana tradition. She told the tale of the character "Sojourner Truth" in order to "transmit cultural ideas and her own comments"[378] to "interrogate and shift" the public perceptions of Black womanhood during and directly after enslavement in the United States.[379] Truth created and acted out a "mythology that would be passed down from generation to generation in a culture bound context"[380] to teach lessons about intolerance and reinforce an Africana liberatory morality and personality. The evidence of her success as a storyteller is that her performance texts have survived to retell the story of Truth's Black womanhood today.

In this chapter, I assert that Truth operated her identity as if she was acting out a character in a story. In performing Sojourner Truth, she told stories that influenced the morality of white people and agency of Africana people. She used her identity performance in order to shift thinking about the capabilities of Africana women, and all Africana people, so that they could have the freedom to act out their cultural realities. To show this, I provide a survey of the representations of Black womanhood disseminated in

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[377] Kariamu Welsh and Molefi Kete Asante, "Myth: The Communication Dimension to the African American Mind." *Journal of Black Studies* 11, no. 4. (June 1981): 388.

[378] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 70.

[379] bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance.* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 220.

[380] Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes please stand up?!': A Critical Analysis of the mythology and culture significance of Black Superheroes." *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation.* eds. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald Jackson II, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 226.

the 19th century, a review of literature that analyzes Truth's application of her identity, a brief biography of Truth to provide context to when and how she adjusted and constructed her identity for the purpose of liberation. I examine how Truth hacked autobiography, photography, and oration to generate a memorable character that educated the public about another way to perceive Black womanhood.

IMAGES OF BLACK WOMANHOOD IN 1830-1870

During African enslavement in the United States, American media in the forms of minstrel shows, newspapers, books, pamphlets, etc. depicted the 'slave' as lazy, uneducated, brutish, happy, and other qualifiers that rationalized the need for Africana people's continued servitude and 'protection' under white rule. The industrial revolution caused the United States to undergo a shift as to how its cultural products were manufactured, which in turn made it easier to circulate white-constructed perceptions of enslaved Africana people nationwide. At the time, newspapers, photographs, and autobiographies were the most popular means of information distribution. They were the primary media forms that disseminated the iconography that sanctioned Africana women's dehumanization.

Newspapers were a significant medium for information distribution before the late 18th century; however, they were not affordable for the majority of individuals in the newly formed United States. After the ratification of the first Amendment in 1789, the Postal Service Act of 1792, and the outrage caused by the 1798 Sedition Act,[381]

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[381] The first amendment declared the freedom of the press; Postal Service Act instituted a federally controlled postal office; and the Sedition Act did not allow speech that criticized the federal government, but with the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, it was not renewed.

newspapers were not subject to censure, and they could be distributed nationally for a low cost.

Newspaper publications grew substantially, and eventually, newspapers became inexpensive so that a majority of United States citizens could acquire them. Newspaper reading became a widespread habit in the U.S. "By 1850, the United States had more than two thousand newspapers, including more than two hundred dailies" that could be cheaply transported across the United States through the postal service. For instance, an individual in Atlanta, Georgia could receive the local news of New York City within a day or two.[382] News and imagery were being transported greater distances and more quickly than previous eras. Newspapers helped build the visual and moral vocabulary of the nation.

Also during the early 19th century, advancements in photography changed the type of visual information that passed between individuals. Beginning around the 1840s, the use of the daguerreotype spawned an American love affair with taking portraits. "By 1850, the daguerreotype trade in America [was] at eight to twelve million dollars a year or about fifty cents per person for every one in the United States."[383] Public access to photography encouraged individuals to own and obtain images of people and places they may never meet or experience. "By the 1860s *cartes-de-visite* had supplanted daguerreotypes as the most popular and affordable type of photograph."[384] Cartes-de-visite were developed from a process that permitted the reproduction of multiple images

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[382] Michael S. Schudson, "Journalism." In *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

[383] Mandy Reid, "Selling Shadows and Substance." *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 3, (2006): 287.

[384] Mandy Reid, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 297.

on one plate, thereby, it allowed for printing multiple photographs at a low cost. Because they were inexpensive, the American public purchased and traded cartes-de-visite in large quantities. They purchased pictures of celebrities such as Abraham Lincoln and Queen Victoria, gave away cartes-de-visite of family members as gifts, or traded their cartes-de-visite for others. Some political movements used cartes-de-visite to fundraise and raise awareness about their cause. During the Civil War, abolitionists sold cartes-de-visite of formerly enslaved individuals at meetings to stir up "sympathy for enslaved individuals and bolster support for the North."[385]

Autobiography was another popular form of disseminating information in the United States in the 19th century. "Since the European men and women settlers recorded their experiences living in the "New World" in the seventeenth century, autobiography has been the preeminent form of U.S. writing."[386] The style of an American autobiography often reflected a spirit of individualism and documented a progressive journey narrative from being a "lesser human" to becoming a "great human."

The techniques of enslavement, especially the actions that objectified Africana women -the activity of selling bodies for profit, physically and sexually abuse, maiming and murdering- necessitated daily interactions between Africana women and white people. The daily observation of the unequal interactions between Africana people and European descendants justified the misrepresentation and exploitation of Africana women. In "everyday" activities and popular media during the 18th and 19th centuries,

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[385] Mitchell, Mary Niall. "The Young White Faces of Slavery" New York Times. January 20, 2014. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://nyti.ms/MC68MU.

[386] Nellie Y. McKay, "Autobiography" In *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 50.

there was a constant visual reinforcement of objectified, sexualized, and brutalized Black women: for sale and runaway advertisements aligned Black women's bodies with monetary value; cartoons characterized Black women with grotesque features such as exaggerated lips and body shape; abolitionist papers primarily documented stories of sexual and physical abuse and violence towards Africana women; slave auctions allowed buyers to view and touch Africana women invasively; and Africana women themselves – through their skin color, clothing, scars, and 'mulatto' children - were living and portable texts of the dehumanizing enslavement.

The graphic iconography of enslaved women was part of the American social system that "regulated and exploited" Africana people. The iconography codified the manner in which the government, social institutions, and individuals constructed policies and social norms about Africana people. "[EDMs of Black womanhood] were industrially manufactured during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, operate collectively as capitalist modes of subjection designed to capture, pursue, embody, individualize, psychologize, and encumber bodies with skins, even as they separate subjectivity from agency."[387] In words and pictures, Black women were mythologized to assert that they were inferior and inhuman. Exaggerated, inaccurate, and false depictions of Black women printed in both pro- and anti- enslavement publications etched in the minds of white Americans that Black women held characteristics that besmirched their humanity. These images

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[387] Kodwo Eshun, "Stealing One's Own Corpse: Afrofuturism as Speculative Heresy," in *The Shadows Took Shape*, curated by Naima J. Keith, Zoe Whitley, and Lauren Haynes, (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), 117.

portrayed Africana women negatively as grotesque, as property, or as a negation of white womanhood.

Through the ubiquity of controlling images, the despicable treatment of Africana women was considered natural, reproducible, and legal. Irrespective of their free or enslaved status, EDMs affected the reality and experiences of all Africana women.

As Grotesque

Figure 7: Close-up of Political Caricature of an African women, in "Miscegenation or the Millennium of Abolitionism" 1864

In many media, illustrations used for political or entertainment purposes depicted African American women with exaggerated body parts to represent them as inhuman. White artists drew Africana women with exaggerated butts, lips, and eyes and they made western-style dresses look awkward on Africana women's bodies. These inaccurate portrayals corresponded with American-European art, literature, and medicine. Many writings used scientific rhetoric to assert that the Black female body was 'more primitive'

than the white female body. For example, there was an "18th century story of intercourse between apes and African women represented as fact."[388] White scientists and politicians published books and articles that perpetuated the myth that Black women were copulating with animals. United States President Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* proposed that orangutans were attracted to Africana women because their characteristics did not mirror those of white women.

> *Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species.*[389]

The various authorities rendering Africana women's physiology as similar to animals supplied white individuals with another rationale for mistreating and enslaving them.

As Property

Europeans' enslavement of Africana people transformed "personality into property,"[390] that is, the characteristics that differentiated Africana people from white people, such as darker skin tones and a non-Christian spirituality, became the signifiers for enslavement. Attributing biological and social markers to assumptions of one's dehumanization sustained the industry of selling and owning Africana people, being that dehumanization became a literature that could be interpreted on certain individual bodies and activities. In classifying Africana phenotypical and cultural markers as attributes of

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[388] Jan Nederveen Pietersie, *White on Black: Images of Africans and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 38.

[389] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (1781-1782), 264-265.

[390] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, (1987): 78.

slave status, European people regarded Africana people as durable goods. Article 461 of the South Carolina Civil Code" is an example of the how entrenched the social perception was to white culture, it states, "[enslaved Africans] shall be reputed and considered real estate 'subject to be mortgaged, according to the rules prescribed by law.'"[391] By law and cultural convention in the United States, Black women's bodies and their labor only held economic value that could be defended in the judicial system and other legislative bodies; Africana women themselves were not human, therefore, governmental institutions did not acknowledge nor protect their personhood.

The mythology that Africana people were property had to be periodically reinforced in order to maintain the illusion that enslavement was legitimate. On slave ships, at slave auctions and sales, and on farms and plantations, practices that damaged Africana woman's body and psyche were "a part of the process of defining slaves as commodities."[392] The normalization of the debasing treatment of Africana women generated a lexicon that categorized Black women as property "in American culture and society."[393] Even those individuals who were not personally connected to enslavement were aware of the meanings being associated with Africana people because of its distribution in public media.

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[391] Hortense Spillers, *Diacritics*, 78.
[392] Barbara Bush, *Women's History Review*, 767.
[393] Ibid.; Hortense Spillers, *Diacritics*, 68.

Figure 5: Advertisements from the 1820s

Newspaper culture in particular reflected the shift in the American symbolic

literacy in the publishing of runaway, for auction, or for sale advertisements. Ads are a

marketing tool that indicates an individual possesses a property or service and wishes to

promote or sell it. The publicizing of the sale of Africana women's bodies were a

constant reminder that Black women's bodies were owned by slave-owners, and they

were not treated as humans. For instance, an 1828 announcement describing a captured

Africana person has a similar rhetorical style as an announcement for a lost pig. In the

notice about the stray sow, the subscriber provides a description of the animal, "she is

white, with a large black streak across her rump, right ear cropt and slit in it, and a

circular bit out of her left ear."[394] He then requests that the "owner come and prove

property, pay charges, and take her away."[395] The jailor had captured and advertised

Sarah Ann Payne, an Africana woman who claimed she was a free woman, as a runaway

because her biological characteristics signified her as property. An ad posted by the

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[394] "A Stray Sow." *The Torch light and Public Advertiser, January 3, 1828.*
[395] Ibid.

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Loudoun County, Virginia Jail uses the same language for Payne as the previous writer used for the pig. Jailor Samuel Hammett gives a perfunctory description of Payne, and noted that she had a 'rather light complexion."[396] He then requested, "The owner of said woman is requested to come forward, prove property, pay charges, and take her away, otherwise she will be disposed of according to the law."[397] Both these ads appear in the notice section of the newspaper, along with sales of farms, clothing items, and enslaved individuals. The public discourse about Africana women was similar to communications about durable goods; They were inherently property to be bought and sold at the whim of white owners.

The various degrading behaviors coupled with a lexicon of enslavement disconnected Africana women from an interpretation of their being that reflected their own cultural locations, self-definitions, and inherent humanity.

In Abolitionist Literature: As Sadistic Pornographic
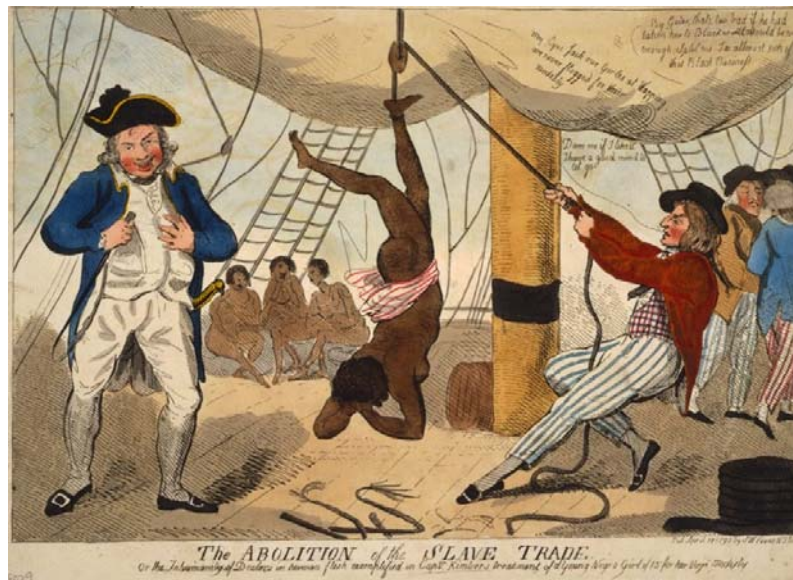
Figure 6: "The Abolition of the Slave Trade" by Isaac Cruikshank, 1792.

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[396] "Committed" *Genius of Liberty*, March 8, 1828.
[397] Ibid.

Beginning around the 1830s, abolitionists used a strategy of "victimizing" Africana women to make enslavement offensive for Northerners. In stories and illustrations, Black women were beaten, sexually assaulted, raped, chained, and mutilated by white male (and female) assailants. The strategy aimed to shame Northerners about their ignoring the treatment of Africana women. It was an effort to "shock and galvanize readers, both men and women, and mobilize them to act against slavery."[398] The abolitionist's seal, created around 1830, has the same intent. It depicts a Black woman on her knees, in chains, and her breasts are bare. Underneath the picture is the caption, "Am I not a woman and a sister?" The seal was printed on bowls, purses, coins, pins, other decorative items, and in appeared in numerous Abolitionist print media.

> *Sarah Grimke, one of the most prominent and radical anti-slavery writers, called these images 'powerful auxiliaries in the cause of emancipation, and [we] recommend that these 'pictorial representations' be multiplied…so that the speechless agony of the fettered slave may unceasingly appeal to the heart of the patriotic, the philanthropic, and the Christian.'[399]*

These images did incite in their viewers an abhorrent reaction to enslavement, but they did not disrupt how viewers consumed violence upon Black bodies. Abolitionists emphasized the physical and sexual abuse of Black women without a subsequent affirmation of their humanity or equity with white womanhood. They attempted to use the imagery of Black women's abuse to elicit a passionate response from white patrons to support the end of Africana enslavement; however, Abolitionists upheld a foundational principle of the American enslavement project that Black women were "unprotected

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[398] Carol Lasser, "Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric," *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 92.

[399] "Artifacts of the Abolitionist Movement." *Daughters of the American Revolution*. April 22, 2014. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.dar.org/museum/artifacts-abolitionist-movement.

flesh" that existed to be maimed.[400] Abolitionists desired to free enslaved Africans from physical bondage, but the misuse of this rhetorical device demonstrates that they did not consider emancipating Africana women from representations of Black women's dehumanization intrinsic to white American culture.

The stereotypes of Africana women traversing the country in newspapers, photographs, and books did not always negatively affect how Africana people perceived themselves under enslavement. Suggesting that Africans lost their culture and assimilated to white European/American gender norms does not explain the exclusive behaviors and practices performed by the enslaved Africans that did not originate from white slaveholders, nor the unique cultural norms that are present in today's African American society. For the most part, Africana women constructed their identity from aspects present within their culture. Although Africana women were enslaved in the Americas, they continued to practice the roles of womanhood as determined by their varying African societies. "Slaveholders could not have dictated how a mother nurtured her child, or how that child learned to conduct herself in the presence of elders...but it is precisely these sorts of familial and communal interactions, that shape and mold culture and individual behavior."[401] Michael Gomez asserts that contrary to popular belief about enslaved Africans being forced to assimilate the European-American culture, Africana people had a high level of autonomy over their cultural development and with certain limitations, Africana people practiced and passed down their own cultural norms. When

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[400] Hortense Spillers, *Diacritics*, 68.
[401] Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African American Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 194.

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Africana women were forced into enslavement in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, they brought their cultural norms with them – be they Fante, Hausa, Akan, etc. - and performed their cultural ways in the new American environment.[402] Barbara Bush, in her article "'Sable Venus', 'She devil' or 'Drudge'?" adds to Gomez's claim about the environment that enabled enslaved Africans to continue developing their culture. "The majority of women of African origin were excluded from Western respectability and remained close to their African cultural roots. They continued to wear the most powerful visual symbol of female African identity, the head-tie."[403] Gomez proposes that a 'hybrid-like' Africana culture in North America that was a mixture of Africana and European cultural aspects, only emerged after legislation demanded harsher regulations on transporting Africans internationally and the abolishment of importing Africans into the United States in 1807.[404]

By the mid-1800s, Africana people "found it necessary to understand the values of labels that white American culture placed on them in order to develop new survival tactics and strategies of identity performance."[405] The Black population desired to operate under their own cultural symbols and behaviors, but the social-political system in the United States continually forced an oppositional iconography upon them. This iconography limited their ability to contribute freely to Africana social development.

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[402] Ibid., 188-189.

[403] Barbara Bush, "'Sable Venus', 'She Devil' or 'Drudge'? British Slavery and the 'Fabulous Fiction' of Black Women's Identities, c. 1650–1838," *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000): 781.

[404] Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African American Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, 8-10.

[405] Alice R. Brown-Collins and Deborah Ridley Sussewell, "The Afro-American Woman's Emerging Selves." *Journal of Black Psychology* 13, no. 1 (1986): 8.

Both enslaved and free Africana women were perceived as grotesque, property, and brutalized/sexualized beings. They had to contend with these EDMs, whether or not they internalized the depictions. Truth shifted a visual language of Black womanhood. She challenged denigrating representations of Black womanhood by performing a multitude of characteristics to unsettle the meaning of Black womanhood, and then she made it palatable and archetypal.

BIOGRAPHY

Truth was born Isabella in 1797 in New York state in an area dominated by the Dutch, where she and her family were considered enslaved individuals.[406] Although born in the United States, her mother and father, James and Elizabeth Bomefree, were both recognized for their distinct African traits. Her father Bomefree was thought to be from the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) because he was a significantly tall individual.[407] Her mother Mau Mau Bet was thought to be from the Kongo people of West Central Africa, due to the prevalence of Dutch trading in that region, and that Mau Mau Bet most likely named Truth Isabella after a female saint.[408] Truth mentions in a published letter in 1863

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[406] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life;" Also, a Memorial Chapter, Giving the Particulars of Her Last Sickness and Death*. Edited by Olive Gilbert and Frances Titus. Electronic Edition. *Documenting the American South*. http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth84/truth84.html
Before taking the moniker Sojourner Truth, she is recorded in historical documents as having a variety of last names. During enslavement, she is referred to as Isabella Baumfree/Bomefree; the surname *Baumfree* was a nickname given to her father designating his tall stature. Truth is also documented as Isabella Hardenbergh (which her writer Olive Gilbert spells as Ardenbirgh in the *Narrative*). The Hardenbergh last name comes from the family who enslaved Truth and her family until 1807. When she walked away from enslavement in 1826, she started to use the last name van Wagenen/van Wagenen which was the surname of the family who initially helped her during her early days of freedom; Her children also took on the van Wagenen surname.
[407] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 9.
[408] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 8-9

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that her grandmother was from Africa, but she does not mention where.[409] The

Hardenbergh family owned Truth, her mother, father, and siblings. Johannis

Hardenbergh, a revolutionary war colonel, died after Truth was born, and Charles, his

third son, inherited her family. Bomefree and Mau Mau Bet worked for him for eight

years until his death.

When Charles died, his estate, including his slaves, were auctioned. In the

Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Truth speaks about the trauma of the slave auction, because

it caused her to be separated from her parents. She mentions, it is "a terrible affair to its

victims, and its incidents and consequences are graven on their hearts as with a pen of

burning steel."[410] At the age of ten, Truth was sold to an English-speaking family named

Nealy. Mr. Nealy would often beat Truth for not understanding Mrs. Nealy's directions.

"Neither Isabel and nor Mrs. Nealy could understand the language of the other; for some

time, it was a source of dissatisfaction to the mistress, and of punishment and suffering to

Isabella."[411] She eventually left the Nealys to work for Scriver, a fisherman and

innkeeper. After a year and a few months, she was sold to the Dumonts, with whom she

worked for until she emancipated herself in 1827.

Her northern experience of enslavement in a Dutch community was no different

from the accounts of Southern cruelty towards enslaved Africana people. As a child, she

was physically abused to the point that "blood streamed from her wounds, and the scars

remained" on her body for the rest of her life. She experienced as a sister and as a mother

the destruction of the Black family. In her autobiography, she recalls her parents sat for

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[409] Truth, Sojourner. "Letter from Sojourner Truth." *Commonwealth*, June 17, 1863.
 "My grandmother and my husband's mother came from Africa, but I did not."
[410] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 26.
[411] Ibid.

hours remembering the characteristics of the children who were sold away from them. Truth also experienced the sale of her child after she claimed her freedom.

In 1817, New York Legislature declared that all slaves born before July 4, 1799 would be freed on July 4, 1827.[412] Truth knew that she was to receive her "free papers" in the summer of 1827, but when she mentioned her pending freedom to Mr. Dumont, he "refused to grant it on the account of the loss he had sustained when she could not use her hand the previous year."[413] With the knowledge that Mr. Dumont was not going to abide by the law and continue to keep her and her child enslaved after the deadline, Truth walked away from enslavement with her youngest child Sophia early one autumn morning in 1827. She eventually found refuge in the home of the Van Wagenen family who sympathized with Black emancipation. While living in their home, Truth heard that Dumont had sold her five-year-old son Peter, an action that led to his transport out of the state to work on a plantation in Alabama. She immediately found a lawyer and went to court to plea for his return to New York, because it was illegal to transport an enslaved individual out of the state. Her son was returned to her with bruises and scars all over his body.[414]

Afterward, she and Peter moved to New York City in 1828 so that she could find a better paying position to support her family. While there, she joined Zion's Church that had an Africana congregation and worked with a missionary group to reform sex workers.[415] In her time in New York, she had reunited with two of her siblings, a sister and brother, but she lost her son Peter. He had become a sailor, and did not return from a voyage. Around 1832, she followed the teachings of Robert Matthews - better known as

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[412] Oscar Williams. "Slavery in Albany, New York, 1624-1827" *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 34, no. 2 (July 2010): 164.
[413] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* Electronic Edition.
[414] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 54.
[415] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 80; 86-7.

Matthias- and worked in his commune in the Sing Sing community of Westchester, NY. Eventually, she was charged with aiding Matthias in the murder of her former employer, but they both were acquitted. Following the case, she sued for slander, and won in 1835.[416] Truth returned to New York City where she lived paycheck to paycheck and felt disillusioned about her position in life. She felt she was not living up to her own morals, and was becoming miserly. Truth mentions that she lived and worked in a home where the owner would give her money to hire a poor man to clear the snow from the steps and sidewalks. Instead of giving the money to the man, she woke up, did the job herself, and kept the money. In reflection of that time, she was repulsed by her own actions and in her Narrative, she states, "the rich rob the poor, and the poor rob one another."[417]

She did not want to continue living a life where she did not care for others, so she decided to leave the city to preach. She believed this idea so strongly that she felt it was the spirit of the Lord who had called her to do his work. On the morning of June 1, 1843, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth, and left the city of New York with a small parcel of her clothes and "two York shillings in her purse."[418]

Truth traveled north, preaching along the way, and depending upon strangers for food and lodging. At first, she lectured in towns and villages where there were crowds already gathered. Eventually, she acquired a large enough following that she could rally her own gatherings. While on the road, she expressed to her newly found acquaintances that she wished to find a quiet place to rest. They directed her to the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, "a utopia enclave in Massachusetts that experimented with racial and gender equality, new industries, and the radical idea of

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[416] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 120

[417] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 98.
[418] Ibid.,100.

living for a common cause."[419] At Northampton, Truth met many of the abolitionist and women's rights leaders that she would work with in later years such as William Lloyd Garrison, Fredrick Douglas, and her biographer, Olive Gilbert. Northampton dissolved in 1846, and Truth stayed in the area working for a local family. After Northampton, Truth was frustrated that she did not have her own house and she was still surviving on the kindness of others. She decided that she could raise funds if she wrote a successful autobiography, similar to Douglas' *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. In 1846, Truth commissioned Gilbert to write her biography and by 1850, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published.

In the 1850s, Truth toured the North and Midwest parts of the country. She visited states such as New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan to deliver speeches against slavery and for women's rights. She shared a podium with the leading abolitionists and women's rights advocates of the 19th century, i.e. Parker Pillsbury, Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. At the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, she addressed the crowd regarding women's suffrage and proclaimed her famous words, "Ar'nt I a woman?" At an 1858 anti-slavery meeting in Silver Lake, Indiana, Truth showed her breasts to the audience because a doctor who supported enslavement claimed that she was a man. She declared to him, "her breasts had suckled many a white babe" and asked if he too "wished to suck!"[420]

During the Civil War, Truth traveled to Washington, DC to campaign for the rights of Africana people, especially those leaving the south. She met with Abraham Lincoln in 1864. She asked him for a position in the National Freedman's Relief

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[419] "The Communitarian Moment; the Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association." Reference and Research Book News 19, no. 4 (November 2004); Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 7.
[420] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 139.

Association. While in DC, she taught classes to Africana women on good household and personal habits, helped many formerly enslaved Africana people find jobs and homes, fought for the physical safety of children in DC who were being stolen by Marylanders, and worked as a nurse in a Freedman's hospital.[421]

After the war, Truth lobbied around the country to acquire land grants for Africana Americans, so that they could establish an Africana state in the western part of the United States around Michigan. She campaigned in Africana communities about her agenda to allow Africana people to escape discrimination in the east by moving west. "In addition to speaking at meetings, she created, circulated, and ultimately submitted a petition for a Negro state to President Ulysses S. Grant in 1870."[422] Despite her efforts, neither Congress nor the president endorsed her petition.

After many years of advocating for Black freedom, she died at her home in Battlefield Creek, Michigan, a town near Detroit, at the age of 86.

LITERATURE ABOUT SOJOURNER TRUTH AND HER IMAGERY

Because Truth is an iconic figure, there is a plethora of biographies and socio-cultural-political examinations of her life and work.[423] Many of these analyses address Truth's rhetorical style, i.e. her use of humor, song, her body, Christianity, etc. in speeches, interviews, articles and letters and her consistent management of her imagery in those mediums. The abundant literature of Truth documents how she employed what she

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[421]Ibid.
"Sojourner, witnessing the afflictions of her people, and desiring to mitigate their sufferings, found homes and employment for many in the Northern States, government furnishing transportation for all."

[422] Jennifer Searcy. "Truth, Sojourner." *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*. London: Routledge, 2007.

[423] Erlene Stetson and Linda David. *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994; Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse. *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*. New York: New York University Press, 1993; Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

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had - her body, mind, and spiritual and moral philosophy - to fight stereotypical images of Black women. Scholars often understate other aspects of her life such as preaching Christianity or lobbying for land for African settlement in the Western United States.

Painter's biography of Truth uses a mix of documents ranging from land records, to newspaper articles, to social histories of communes to depict Sojourner Truth as "a nineteenth-century woman who developed as she aged, learning from her associates, and moved in identifiable human networks."[424] Painter writes *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* in this style with hope that by substantiating Truth's history through archival research, she can uncover the reality of Truth's life buried under the layers of myth. She infers that what is known about Truth is a simplification of the woman who lived in the 19th century. "[Americans] think of Truth as a natural, uncomplicated presence in our national life. Rather than a person in history, she works as a symbol. To appreciate the meaning of the symbol, we need know almost nothing of the person."[425] Although Truth endures as a representation of Black womanhood, Painter asserts that many of the sensational accounts that demonstrate her declaring her intersectional oppressions were written by feminists and abolitionists in order to support their own agendas.

When Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" for the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1863 she had not seen Truth for several years. Stowe's Sojourner Truth, based on memory, cursory research in Truth's and Gilbert's Narrative and anti-slavery newspaper coverage from the late 1850s, presents Truth's characteristics, genuine or not, that were most useful to this hurried author. According to Stowe, Truth was born in Africa and had passed by the time "the Libyan Sybil" was published.[426]

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[424] Nell Irwin Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 280.
[425] Ibid., 5.
[426] Ibid., 8.

Truth did not produce many primary source documents for future generations to analyze and comment on her personality and/or opinions. Most of the historical record of her existence draws from others judgment of who they believe Truth was. Consequently, in the contemporary era, her shadow - not her lived experience - prevails as the principal resource in which to understand Truth.

Painter expresses concern about the fact that Truth's history plays a secondary role to her mythological representation. She finds that historians, students, academics, and other "thoughtful people" embrace the mythic character over the real person when it comes to Truth, because the symbolic Truth supports their own agendas. She laments, "The symbol we require in our public life still triumphs over scholarship."[427] By emphasizing her significance as an icon, the public maintains an image of Truth who "never tires, never doubts, achieves in the most discouraging of circumstances" for their benefit.[428] Painter remarks, "[Truth] was a slave, after all,"[429] therefore, others employment of Truth as a symbol continues her exploitation.

Painter claims that the construction of Truth in academia and popular culture reinforces the practice of dis-agency of Africana women. She claims that Truth's actions become part of the repository of contributions to other causes, and do not add to the development of her own culture. On the other hand, while Painter "does not allow the symbol to obscure the historical life,"[430] she also minimizes the influence Truth had in creating her iconic status; she only sees Truth as a historical figure who influenced her legacy solely through her actions.

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[427] Ibid., 287.
[428] Ibid., 277.
[429] Ibid., 277.
[430] Jay Riley Case, "*Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (Book Review)" *Fides et Historia : Official Publication of the Conference on Faith and History* 29, no. 3 (1997), 92.

In the chapter "Tickety-ump-ump-nicky nacky:" Re-creating, Reknowing, and Refiguring Sojourner Truth," Celeste-Marie Bernier disagrees with Painter's assessment that Truth is exploited as a symbol. Alternatively, Bernier asserts that Truth initiated the manner in which the public consumed her multifaceted and ever-changing imagery. She "created and edited her own visual narrative, and inhabited multiple personae beyond her symbolic identities as an archetypal enslaved figure and as an abolitionist emblem."[431] Her identity served as her prosthetic; it enhanced her ability to signify Africana female bodies and resist white stereotyping.

Bernier erects Truth as a woman who "consciously experimented with ambiguous representations" of herself and "deliberately" defined, adjusted and adapted her performance of identity.[432] She embraces the idea that Truth is engaged in creating her own mythology because Truth designed, managed, and/or cosigned the aspects by which people symbolize her. Others may use her image to establish their own agendas, but Truth crafted the inherent meaning embedded within her image. For instance, Truth "sat for at least fourteen portraits in seven sittings between 1863 and about 1875."[433] These photographs, which are fairly homogeneous, depict Truth standing or sitting, clad in demure clothing and surrounded by certain props like knitting needles, books, vases or her cane. Directly after her many speaking engagements as well as through the mail, she sold those photographs in the form of cartes-de-visite. At the bottom of each was printed the phrase, "I sell the shadow to support the substance." Bernier argues, "Truth insisted on the epigraph to reveal that her competing mythologies of selfhood were always

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[431] Celeste-Marie Bernier, ""Tickety-ump-ump-nicky Nacky:" Re-Creating, Reknowing, and Refiguring Sojourner Truth." in *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 205.

[432] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 204.

[433] Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*, 198.

secondary to a clear-cut sense of her corporeality."[434] The combination of the portrait and the phrase generated a dialogue between the viewer and the carte-de-visite. Truth aimed to "expose to her audience to the complex relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial, and the authentic and the artificial or fake."[435] Her portraits were a significant medium that fulfilled her objectives.

Bernier attributes Truth with being a genius of symbol formation and manipulation, because "she pushed the boundaries of visual and oratorical languages to destabilize boundaries and inspire audience engagement."[436] Truth experimented with imagery and words to find which ones best inspired her listeners. She also advocated for Black women's humanity in the white mainstream imagination "incorporating a wide array of tropes and motifs" that would disrupt the perfunctory reading of those symbols.[437] The fact that she was a formerly enslaved individual from the North limited people from making hasty interpretations about Truth's background, and put emphasis on other geographic locations where horrific practices of enslavement took place. "Truth's images were carefully arranged" to affect white morality, and the public image of Africana women. Bernier concludes that Truth's style of intellectual practice is underappreciated in comparison to other forms of political thought or revolutionary tactics.

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby takes the middle road between Painter's discomfort of the symbolic exploitation of Truth and Bernier's acceptance of Truth's participation in her own symbolic presence. In "Negative-Positive Truths," Grigsby claims that Truth is unique because she controlled both the meaning and value of her own image. She claims

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[434] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 218.

[435] Ibid., 212.
[436] Ibid., 221.
[437] Ibid.

that Truth's gender and racial identity designated her as a marginalized individual in U.S. society who, when represented in a photograph, obtained a monetary value that Truth employed differently than the selling of her own corporal form. Her photographs became equivalent to a currency that altered the meaning of the exchange of Black womanhood.

Similar to Bernier, Grigsby analyzes the significance of image ownership, in particular, the idea that a Sojourner Truth can affirm her free status by selling her own image. The epigraph, "I sell the shadow to support the substance," is an obvious indication of Truth's awareness of agency. She asserts on her performance text that she is the agent who engages in the selling of herself, as opposed to her previous status where others sold her. Moreover, Truth sold her image in order to fund herself, and by extension, monetarily support the rights of all women and Africana people. Her cartes-de-visite served "as a kind of paper money dependent upon a community willing to believe in representation's capacity to produce material results, make money where there was none, and to do so partly in order to abolish [discrimination.]"[438] Like greenbacks, her cartes-de-visite were capable of being exchanged among the politically like-minded to finance Africana social development.

Grigsby argues that Truth knowingly aligned her photographs with paper money.[439] Truth's selling cartes-de-visite with her image and epigraph resembles the implementation of greenbacks in the United States.[440] The federal government's issuance of paper currency required American society to accept the power of representation. Citizens were pressed to acknowledge that the value of an image derived from the practice of its exchange. A portrait of a president and decorative filigree do not determine the economic value of a dollar; the worth of paper money was contingent upon trust in

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[438] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations*, 24.
[439] Ibid., 24.
[440] Ibid., 27.

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the United States and for which it stands. Truth was aware that the act of selling of her image was as much a reflection of her politics as what symbols existed in the carte-de-visite. She "wanted to make herself the proprietor of an image that was at once a humble substance and a representation of value.[441] Her selling of her image - an image of a Black woman- resembles the practices of the slavery industry; however, the profits of her sales benefit Truth and Black freedom.

Different from both Painter and Bernier, Grigsby examines the dimensions of Truth's semiology. According to Grigsby, Truth became a symbol that she and others replicate to promote their causes. She distributed her version of Black womanhood to the masses so that they were compelled to acknowledge Africana humanity, or exist in a state of confusion when consuming an image that juxtaposes familiar signs of white middle class and Africana physical characteristics. "She invited viewers to 'read' her images but at the same time emphasized their failures by making it difficult for them to do so."[442] Truth embraced photography as a technology that could reroute an individual's participation in the language of enslavement, and into contributing to the lexicon of liberation.[443] She used the adoption of greenback as the currency of United States as part of her own strategy to persuade her audiences to value her image, and her substance.

Although Painter wants her viewers to see Truth as more than a symbol, Grigsby and Bernier both argue that Truth was purposefully crafting herself and her performance texts as symbols. Painter wants the scholarly focus to center on Truth's overall agency as a Black woman in the 19th century, which is an admirable goal; however, I agree with Grigsby and Bernier that Truth enacted her agency with both short term and long-term

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[441] Ibid., 30.
[442] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 221.
[443] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations,* 27.

objectives. She was deliberate about how her image influenced public opinion and their commonly held beliefs about Africana women, in her era and in future generations.

Truth intended for her identity performance to establish a different lexicon in which white and Black people read Black womanhood. "She sought to secure individual agency for Black female subjects by countering their objectifying exhibition [in public media.]"[444] Because Truth's impact upon Africana women's representation is ongoing, then it is a sankofic endeavor to trace the processes of her myth-making project. As Truth uses her identity as a tool for liberating Africana women, I claim that she operates her identity performance like a storyteller, in the Africana cultural tradition. She recalls tales of "Sojourner Truth, the iconic phenomenon"[445] to public audiences, and habitually develops her craft as a storyteller by restyling her content or presentation in order to increase the impact of her story. In making her character famous, she simultaneously made the substance- her ideas and ideals – renown.

TRUTH'S LIBERATION TECHNOLOGIES

An agent for Liberation

Before I examine how Truth used her identity as a means to liberate Africana people from the consequences of destructive representations, I briefly establish that in the 19th century, Sojourner Truth behaved as an Africana agent who consistently acted freely and independently to generate the cultural resources necessary for the development and maintenance of an Africana cultural reality. An Africana agent has the characteristics of being an Africana individual who affiliates themselves with the customs, traditions, or

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[444] Bernier, 212.
[445] Bernier, 218.

rituals of African culture. They draw on these beliefs, rules and values to form their own intentions and enact their projects, and through their activity, culture itself is reconstituted. In the presence of oppression, the act of (re)building Africana "culture is a site of resistance and struggle."[446] Without the presence of behaviors that link the Africana individual to an Africana cultural source, an Africana individual is functioning from a dislocated position; therefore, their actions do not contribute to Africana social development. For Sojourner Truth to wield liberation technologies, she must be an African agent.

On many occasions, Truth identified herself as a member of the Africana cultural group and declared her solidarity with the local and national Africana community. In a letter by abolitionist Parker Pillsbury, he recounts an incident in the mid-1800s where a young lawyer declares that Africana people were only fit to be slaves, to which Sojourner Truth declared, "Now, I am the pure African. You can all see that plain enough. I am the pure African; none of your white blood runs in my veins."[447] In a speech advocating for better resources for the freedmen living in Washington D.C., she reasserts her status as a formerly enslaved person, "I was forty years a slave in the State of New York, and was emancipated along with the other colored people of the State."[448] Another example where she claims having a similar heritage as the people for which she advocates was at the 1867 American Equal Rights Association meeting. Sojourner Truth remarks, "I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored

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[446] Yehudi O. Webster, *Against the Multicultural Agenda: A Critical Thinking Alternative.* (London: Praeger, 1997), 133.

[447] Lillie B. Chace Wyman, "Sojourner Truth: With Portraits," New England Magazine 24, no. 1 (March 1901): 64.

[448] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 226.

women."[449] Truth was eager to claim her identity because she never distinguished herself as separate from the Africana community. Truth associated with many progressive whites in her lifetime, but she remained rooted in the Africana community. The popular history of Truth highlights her lecturing in the predominately white abolitionist and women's rights oration circuits; however, during her visits to various towns and cities, she made an effort to visit Africana communities and give lectures for Africana people. For example, in 1869, "She announced a special evening lecture for 'the colored people of Vineland (NJ).' Whites could attend her meeting with Blacks if they wished, she said facetiously, as she was 'no respecter of color.'"[450] In her home town of Battle Creek, she was a guest speaker at the observation of "the 39th anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves of the British West Indies."

Additionally, Truth performed acts that enabled African people to develop their own cultural imperatives. Primarily, Truth used oration as a method to change opinions. She spoke at public events expressing her anti-enslavement and pro-women views, and used simple logic to convince others to agree with her politics. In particular, she spoke on universal suffrage, and questioned the logic of the government not granting women the right to vote. She stated,

> *I must sojourn once to the ballot-box before I die. I hear the ballot-box is*
> *a beautiful glass globe, so you can see all the votes as they go in. Now, the*
> *first time I vote I'll see if a woman's vote looks any different from the rest*

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[449] Sojourner Truth, "Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association," New York City, May 9, 1867. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/dubois/classes/995/98F/doc26.html
[450] Margaret Washington, Sojourner Truth's America, 351.

— if it makes any stir or commotion. If it don't inside, it need not outside.[451]

She was particularly concerned that Africana women would not receive the right to vote. She stated in 1867, "if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before."[452] Truth was sure that voting rights had to be universal for both men and women of any race as a means to protect all people from being ignored or oppressed by their government.

She was an ideal example of an Africana activist because she practiced what she preached. Truth engaged in many public actions to disrupt white cultural domination over Africana people. In Battle Creek, before an election, she attempted to register to vote and "have her name entered upon the list of electors"[453] but authorities denied her rights. She returned on the election day, to the same result. She was determined "to continue the assertion of her right, until she gain[ed] it."[454] During the Civil War, Sojourner Truth raised food and clothing contributions for Black regiments. She "took buggy rides out to the barracks to encourage the troops, solicited numerous contributions for the soldiers, and transported supplies to Camp Ward."[455] She frequently made trips to Washington D.C. to volunteer as a nurse in the freedman's hospital. She taught "order, cleanliness and

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[451] Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Sojourner Truth on the Press." In *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2: 1861-1876, 926-928. Edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. (Rochester, NY: Privately Published, 1881), 928.

[452] Sojourner Truth, "Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association," New York City, May 9, 1867. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/dubois/classes/995/98F/doc26.html

[453] "Republican Meeting --Sojourner Truth." *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 231-232.

[454] Ibid.

[455] Margaret Washington , *Sojourner Truth's America*, 308.

virtue"[456] to the Africana refugees. In the capital, she successfully challenged the

segregation of streetcars. When she first arrived in the city, only one trolley car in

Washington D.C served Africana people. Truth "complained to the president of the street

railroad, who ordered the Jim Crow car to be taken off. Subsequently, a law was passed

giving the colored people equal car privileges with the white."[457] Afterwards, Truth

confronted racist streetcar drivers who refused her admission. On one particular occasion,

Truth and Laura Haviland, a white woman philanthropist, attempted to ride the streetcars

after gathering supplies for the hospital. Haviland signaled for the streetcar, and "when it

stopped, [Truth] ran and jumped aboard. The conductor pushed [Truth] back *saying,* 'Get

out of the way and let this lady come in' [Truth replied] "Whoop! I am a lady too."[458]

Truth and Haviland then transferred to another streetcar. In the next car, Truth recalls,

> *The conductor grabbed me by the shoulder and jerked me around,*
> *ordering me to get out. I told him I would not…[He gave] me another*
> *push which slammed me against the door. I told him I would let him know*
> *whether he could shove me about like a dog, and said to Mrs. Haviland,*
> *'[Take the number of this car.' At this, the man looked alarmed, and gave*
> *us no more trouble. When we arrived at the hospital, the surgeons were*
> *called in to examine my shoulder and found that a bone was misplaced. I*
> *complained to the president of the road, who advised me to arrest the man*
> *for assault and battery. The [Freedmen's]Bureau furnished me a lawyer,*
> *and the fellow lost his situation. It created a great sensation, and before*
> *the trial was ended, the inside of the cars looked like pepper and salt.*[459]

In her later years, after working diligently with the Africana people displaced by the Civil

War, "Truth began lobbying for Africana people to migrate to the Western part of the

United States"[460] and circulated a petition for the government to assist in Africana

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[456] Nell Irwin Painter, *Gender and History,* 7
[457] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 184.
[458] Ibid., 186.
[459] Ibid., 199.
[460] Nell Irwin Painter, *Gender and History,* 11

people's relocation to areas such as Kansas. "She was convinced that the freed people needed land and their own state in the West"[461] in order to live a self-determined life, She remarked,

> *The government has given land to the railroads in the West. Can it do as much for these poor creatures. Let them give them land and an outset, and have teachers learn them to read. Then they can be somebody. That's what I want. You owe it to them, because you took away from them all they earned and made them what they are…You are the cause of de brutality of these poor creatures. For you're the children of those who enslaved them.*[462]

Throughout her life, Truth engaged in opening up locations and avenues for Africana people to act upon their own agential imperatives.

Truth becomes Truth
"We have discovered that she . . . is not exactly what she seems."[463]

Performance of identity is not always a conscious action. Particularly, the performance of race is sometimes imposed upon an individual or group. They may inadvertently perform blackness just because their bodies exist in a specific space, not necessarily, because they are actively acting out blackness. "Black performance can become a vehicle through which "other-ness" is seen and not seen 'depending upon a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion.'"[464] A person may accept the external imposition of blackness, thereby consenting to their position of being a mirror for whiteness; Conversely, they may react against being an other by asserting their own interpretation of the meaning of blackness. Truth uses both passive

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[461] Nell Irwin Painter, *Gender and History,* 7
[462] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 226.
[463] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 201.
[464] Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,* 7.

and active forms of her identity performance "to transgress the bounds of Black

subjugation in relationship to the dominant white culture."[465] She used her body, her

intellect, and her numerous performance texts to unbalance interpretations of her

ephemeral and material representations. "Hers was a body, identity, and experience that

engaged in multiple imaginary narratives of being and becoming."[466] Truth perpetually

defied a typical documentation of her life and works in order to remain "not exactly what

she seems." [467] The documentation of her life primarily comes from what she said in her

speeches or from the few letters she had written by others. She boldly perpetuated her

own interpretation of the meaning of her identity performance as reality. Because of her

management of identity, Truth crafted a narrative about herself that re-signified Black

womanhood to match her own radical imagery. Her performance of Black womanhood

"acted as a critical intervention to disrupt the misinterpretation of"[468] Africana life.

In "Read[ing] Men and Nations: Women in the Black Radical Tradition," African

American Studies scholar Ula Taylor examines Truth's intersectional performance of

"being black, radical, and woman."[469] She asserts, "Truth constructed a persona to be

reckoned with," as a method "to challenge discriminatory practices of white America,

and the complacency of African-American elites satisfied with mainstream crumbs and

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[465] bell hooks, *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, 212.

[466] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 201.

[467] Gilbert Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c.* New York: Published by G. Vale, No. 84 Roosevelt Street, 1835. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/vale/vale.html

[468] bell hooks, *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, 214.

[469] Ula Y. Taylor, "Read[ing] men and nations: Women in the Black Radical Tradition," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4, (1999): 79.

middle-class privileges."[470] Truth used her identity performance "to mobilize masses of people to challenge discriminatory practices that kept people of Africana descent poor and disempowered."[471] At the time, her identity was the best, and most likely, only, tool she had at her disposal to accomplish her objective. When Truth became an activist, she re-claimed her voice and asserted her right to speak. From this empowered position, she dedicated her life to honing her identity as a means to influence and compel individuals to act against racism, sexism, and other oppressions that directly impacted the life chances of Africana people. Truth had little capital, and often gave her time and money to help others. Her most consistent resource was her identity. As bell hooks argues, "Africana performance does not require material resources nor institutional structures."[472] Truth employed her personality or representations of her characteristics anywhere, at any time to resist white cultural domination.

Between her emancipation in 1826 and when she first started touring for abolitionism and women's rights around 1846, Truth gathered the performance elements that would undergird the Africana woman identity she would perform for most of her life. Sociologist Sarah Willie argues that individuals who are not part of the privileged class in their society have difficulty "acting out what it means to live with, perhaps even embrace, characteristics of their own cultural group. For them, constructing a positive identity can become the challenge of a lifetime."[473] Truth is the epitome of this statement; she spent over 40 years crafting a persona that both challenged assumptions about Black

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[470] Ibid., 74, 79-80;
[471] Ibid.
[472] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 211.
[473] Sarah Susannah Willie, *Acting Black College, Identity, and the Performance of Race*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 140.

womanhood and provided imitable attributes for her community members. When she preached around the northeastern United States and lived at the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, Truth developed the characteristics of the 'Sojourner Truth identity' she would perform for most of her life.

After Truth walked away from enslavement, she lived with the Van Wagenen family who were Methodists. Since they were helping her adjust to free life, she would often join them at their Methodist meetings. Like many enslaved individuals, Truth only knew Christianity as told to her by slaveholders. Her parents knew God, but they were not familiar with the significance of Jesus in the European Christian tradition. She eventually joined the Methodist church because she was drawn to their camp meetings, [474] lecturing style of communal worship, and tolerance for both Africana people and women to preach. As a Methodist, Truth began to study the Bible. Because she could not read, she had others read scriptures to her, so that she could "compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her. She came to the conclusion that the spirit of truth spoke in those records, but that the recorders of those truths had intermingled with them ideas and suppositions of their own."[475]

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[474] Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*. 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 1999), xi.
    Camp meetings were sessions of Christian worship often held outside during the summer months and could last multiple days. The meetings did not have a rigid structure, and the events were dictated by the various participants who would led the crowd. People would sing multiple hymns, pray for long periods of time, and multiple speakers would preach one after the other. Participants would have high emotions, and may start shouting, singing, crying, or falling on the ground.
[475] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 96

When she moved to New York, Truth also attended free meetings[476] and camp meetings that were amenable to having speakers from any of the people in attendance. When she lectured, she mixed her own experience of being enslaved with the various teachings of the Bible. This juxtaposition of religious content with the social issues of the time made Truth's lectures poignant and attention grabbing. As Truth spoke at a variety of Methodist events around the city, she became a bit of a celebrity. One of her employers at the time said, "she was known for her long and loud preaching and praying, remarkable for their influence in converting…her speaking was miraculous, and that even learned and respectable people were running after her."[477] In these early years of her preaching, Truth learned to be an effective lecturer. In 1843, at an Africana Methodist church, Truth was described as "a fine specimen of natural oratory. In propriety energy, and grace of action, She beats any teacher of elocution we ever heard."[478] She was known to clearly state her points, use both affective and rational elements in her speeches, and successfully convert many individuals to Christianity.

Truth left New York City in 1843 to travel north and lecture at camp meetings to "testify of the hope that was in her" and teach the people "with her own most curious and original views…to embrace Jesus." [479] "She first spoke at meetings that she heard of on the road, then she advertised her own meetings which gathered large audiences. Truth

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[476] A meeting where those in attendance were encouraged to talk about their religious experience; It did not include a sermon or lecture by church authority.

[477] Gilbert Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence*, 21

[478] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*, 147.

[479] Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziu, *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, 15.

mentions in *The Narrative* that during this time she was having 'a good time.'" [480] On the

road, she quickly perfected her style, sharpening her singing and praying styles, and

becoming skilled at creating innovative and logical opinions about a myriad of religious

issues. A friend Truth met on the road stated that she had an "aptness and point of her

remarks, frequently illustrated by figures the more original and expressive."[481] Overall,

Truth practiced the skills of a well-rounded entertainer. She was known to be an

"excellent dancer and a good singer,"[482] and used these talents to supplement her

preaching. She practiced her presentation style and made herself aware of the rhythm of

her speech. She studied and contemplated on the Bible to make sure that the content of

her lectures was sound. She also used the spontaneity of the Methodist meetings to

practice how to engage different audiences quickly.[483]

When she began her series of iterant preaching, Truth took on the name Sojourner

Truth to reflect that she was going to listen to God, and do God's work. There are a few

theories as to why she changed her name. Washington argues that Truth changed her

name as a reflection of her pilgrimage; She was walking in the tradition of prophets of the

Bible, and of other Methodist preachers she had encountered. "Robert Matthews took the

name 'Father Matthias;' Saul of Tarsus in the new Testament of the Bible had become

Paul."[484] Painter remarks that Truth "had a long-standing preoccupation with truth."[485]

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[480] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 101.
[481] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 114.
[482] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*, 45.
[483] Leslie C. Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation." (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009), 24.
[484] Margaret Washington , *Sojourner Truth's America,* 149.
[485] Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 75.

She had been to court twice since her emancipation: the first time for the return of her

son, and the second to sue for libel against killing her former employer. Both incidents

left Truth with "anxiety over the integrity of her word."[486] She took the surname Truth as

a symbolic coupling of her identity with this ideal characteristic. American art historian

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw suggests Truth participated in the practice of many formerly

enslaved individuals of re-naming oneself after emancipation. "Africans that arrived on

slave ships were given new names as they were sold into slavery. It was not until a slave

was free that he/she was able to name him/her-self."[487] When she was taken in by the

Van Wagenen family, Truth adopted their last name to reflect her new status and as a

way to thank them. She continued to use the surname Van Wagenen for a decade or so

after she adopted the name Sojourner Truth. When she made her decision to lecture in the

North, she may have felt a similar sense of freedom to rename herself because she was

walking away from the bondage of the wickedness of New York City. Stowe depicts

Truth giving testimony that her self-naming was both a symbol of her free status and her

spirituality,

> *When I left bondage, I left everything behind. I wan't goin' to keep nothin'*
> *of Egypt on me: an' so I asked the Lord to give me a new name and the*
> *Lord gave me the name of 'Sojourner' 'cause I was to travel up and down*
> *the land, talking to people, an' being a sign to them. Then I told the Lord I*
> *wanted another name, cause everyone else had two names: an' the Lord*
> *give me 'Truth' 'cause I was to declare truth to them.[488]*

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[486] Ibid.

[487] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw qtd in Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer. *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 16.

[488] M. E. B. "Sojourner Truth: Life and Adventures of a Very Remarkable Colored Woman." (*Chicago Defender*, November 26, 1880): 7.

In taking on a new name, Sojourner Truth generated a new identity; this resulted in her distinguishing the person named Isabella from the individual who would live as Sojourner Truth. While they may have had a similar past, Sojourner Truth was not Isabella. I add to this discourse of naming that Truth was naming herself as part of her liberatory performance. She did not want to her proselytization to be encumbered by her real history. From this moment forward, Truth embraced the complexity of identity. She used the convention of naming to "index the frame of imagination"[489] for herself and her audience. Her name "conceptualizes one's ideology and how one interprets the speaker."[490] Anytime Truth spoke, she was conditioning her audience to associate her words with a certain genuineness. They could trust what she said, and thereby, Truth had an easier time persuading them to act upon what she said. Sojourner Truth's adopting a new name also has similarities to the Hip-Hop djeli, the MC. Their practice of taking a pseudonym "emerges out the relationship between themselves, the crowd, and the music sampling technology."[491] The MC uses the equipment and technique of remixing of older songs, the mood of the audience, and their own imagination to generate a new cultural product, Hip-Hop; the MC's embrace of the artifice of their position reflects the relationship between the act of performing and the person who performs. They developed a rhetorical device to signify that the performance exists simultaneously in time and space as the producer who generates it.[492] Truth constructed a persona developed from

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[489] Dawn-Elissa T.I. Fischer. "Hip-Hop Within a Womanist Lens." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 92.
[490] Ibid.
[491] Paul Youngquist, "The Afro Futurism of DJ Vassa." European Romantic Review 16, no. 2, (2005): 186.
[492] Ibid., 186.

her experiences of being a witness of both enslavement and Christianity. She utilized this identity as a tool in and of itself to affect her listeners, and as the device that causes her listeners to change. Truth became Sojourner Truth as a way to persuade through her being and her action.

When Truth arrived at Northampton in 1843 after a few months preaching around the northeast, she took an interest in abolition. At the community, she met many of the famous abolitionists such as Fredrick Douglas, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and others. While there, she adjusted her Methodist preaching style and advocated not only for spiritual salvation of the individual, but moral liberation of the nation. During her stay in the community, she became an asset to Garrison and the abolitionist cause, but David Ruggles mentored her in antislavery activism. Ruggles was an Africana journalist, abolitionist, and healer who helped manage Northampton. He was an advocate for hydropathy, and he treated Truth when she was ill. "Under Ruggles mentorship, Truth expanded her abolitionist views and methods."[493] "He advocated a 'practical abolitionism' that included civil disobedience and self-defense in order to gain and preserve the rights of Africana people."[494] While Truth's peers felt that she had a sound mind, she was mostly knowledgeable on the Bible and Christian thought. In Northampton, she began to shift the content of her preaching towards political causes. She began 'reading' multiple newspapers and having discourse with the other progressives living in the area about the morality of slavery and the discrimination of

[493] Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 183.
[494] "David Ruggles, Abolitionist and Mentor to Abolitionists," *UNC Press Blog.* February 19, 2010. Accessed November 22, 2015. http://uncpressblog.com/2010/02/19/david-ruggles-abolitionist-and-mentor-to-abolitionists/.

women in comparison to the privileges of manhood. She made her first public anti-slavery address in September 1844, at a meeting that Ruggles chaired. By the time she spoke in 1850, she had had many years to hone lecturing about abolitionism, to the point where she was as compelling in her political speeches as she was in her Christian proselytization. For example, at the Rochester, New York Anti-Slavery Convention, "she declared that she pitied the poor slave-holder and prayed for him because 'God will take care of the poor trampled slave, but where will the slaveholder be when eternity begins?'"[495] In this statement, Comparative Literature theorists Suzanne Fitch and Rosann Mandziunk suggest, "Truth transformed the powerful white slaveholder into an object of pity. Using her cogent style of oration, she subverts the dominance of whites while elevating the worth of her own race."[496]

In practicing public speaking, she "transgressed acceptable boundaries of speech" as she was both a female and a Black person. She struggled against the stereotypes that presumed Black people were not intelligent enough to speak, and women who spoke in public were immoral. Black women were given more social leeway to pursue public speaking than white women were because they were considered inherently tainted by mainstream white society. The mythology that Black women were hypersexual because of their African heritage hid the actuality of white men and women sexually assaulting Africana women. Moreover, since they were publically perceived as unchaste, Africana women were not viewed as in need of protection from the gaze of white men. W.E.B. Du

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[495] Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziu, *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, 18.
[496] Ibid., 67.

Bois argued that Africana women had more freedom to navigate public space than white women. White male patriarchy limited white women's access in order to preserve the notion that they were pure. This is not to assume that it was usual to see a Black woman speaking in large forums, or easy for Black women to be orators and activists. Middle class Black men and women who deliberated in speeches and newspapers about the future of Africana people post-enslavement did have issue with Black women speaking in public. They believed that if Africana men had similar attributes as white men – especially the privilege of patriarchy, Africana people would gain respect from their former oppressors -- which will then uplift the race. Women speaking in public was an offense to middle class Black manhood, because it appeared to be a disregard of Black male patriarchy. Regardless of these beliefs, Africana women had more freedom to traverse public spaces because they were not perceived as women who would become defiled if they behaved improperly; therefore, men and women of both races did not feel as compelled to regulate their movement. Du Bois states, "some women are born free, and some amid insult and scarlet letters achieve freedom, but our women in black had freedom thrust contemptuously upon them."[497] Truth and other Africana women in the 19th century who traveled across the country to advocate abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights on the public stage challenged sexism and racism with their advocacy and their presence at the podium. Taylor asserts, "it was [difficult] for Black women to

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[497] Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Damnation of Women." *The Crisis* 107, no. 6 (2000): S8.

become known or visible in American society."[498] These women insisted that their female bodies be seen and Africana thoughts be heard.

Painter suggests that Truth is unique because very few if any of the other formerly enslaved Black women stayed in the public limelight for a significant length of time. The combination of being both a survivor of enslavement and an active radical would take a toll on any individual. Truth's peer Harriet Tubman did speak at a few public events, but she did not become a prolific and lasting speaker in comparison to Truth. Taylor proposes that as a strategy to endure the anguish of the Africana woman experience while struggling against multiple systems of oppression, "notable radical [Africana]women constructed a public image that forced others to see them as progressive agents in the making of history."[499] In particular, Truth took on the persona of a storyteller. Although there existed a woman who performed the many activist actions as detailed in newspapers and in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, I argue that the protagonist that is described in those narratives is a mythical hero as told by her storyteller.

Myths originate from Africana experiences, and therefore, they can be crafted from the events and trials of historical individuals. "Myths detail "a heroine's mission to surmount obstacles in the cause of peace, love, or collective harmony. They provide solutions to crises in the collective life of the people."[500] Myths come from a collective need to express a certain aspect of the Africana ontology, and they are presented usually without an author. Contemporarily, Harriet Tubman is a mythic figure because she "is an

[498] Ula Y. Taylor, "Read[ing] men and nations: Women in the Black Radical Tradition," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4, (1999): 73.
[499] Ibid.
[500] Molefi Kete Asante, The Afrocentric Idea. Rev. and Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 112.

embodiment of both a cultural principle and a pattern of 'reaching back to bring someone forward.'"[501] Stories about Tubman represent the epic journeying of Africana people in the United States to spaces where they can live freely as Africana people, such as running to Maroon communities during enslavement, moving to northern or western cities to find better work opportunities, or moving to another country to escape United States racism. I propose that Truth mythologized herself. She employed her complex understanding of identity, and enhanced her impact on others by performing multiple personas. In Africana performance, "there is a performance for multilayered performances given the normalcy of the practice of audience members and performers switching roles. A performer may, within a single performance, be at one point 'acting' and at another point 'presenting the self.'"[502] She became both the storyteller of the person who lived as Truth, and person who lived through these actions. Truth was an African agent who fought for liberation, but she was also a propagandist who used commonly understood symbols to reorient racist and sexist opinions. Truth constructed a character that she deliberately imbued with political value, in order "to extend the ordinary of a moment," so that it may operate to "reveal the truth of reality, and demonstrate Africana people's control over their circumstances. She uses her creativity and imagination to convince others that the Africana communities' collective future is brighter than its present."[503] Truth told stylized and affective stories in front of large audiences across most of the United States - using the actions and thoughts of the character Sojourner Truth - in order to establish her

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[501] Ibid., 117.

[502] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* Kindle Edition.

[503] Molefi Kete Asante, The Afrocentric Idea. Rev. and Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 113.

version of Black womanhood. In books, and speeches, Truth strategically retold a collection of her character's stories to manage how audiences interpreted her and other Africana women.

As an Africana storyteller, Truth engaged in the tradition of her woman ancestors. She is an elder of her community who "transmits cultural ideas and her own commentary on those ideas through the medium of oral history and song."[504] Her mother, Mau Mau Bet exposed Truth to storytelling early in her life. In her *Narrative*, Truth recalls when her family was waiting for the day of the slave auction after the death of the slaveholder, Charles Hardenburgh. Her mother pointed to the stars, and told Truth,

> *"'Those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down upon your brothers and sisters, and which they see as they look up to them, though they are ever so far away from us, and each other."*[505]

Mau Mau Bet expressed the loss of her children through a proverbial phrase. She utilized natural elements to provide herself and Truth a message of hope after trauma. Truth often used similar elements to embellish events in her life, or to explain abolitionism and women's rights to detractors.

Truth developed multiple storytelling tactics over the course of her life. She used all the resources she had at her disposal: her body, her voice, her clothes, etc. She chose to use all aspects of her identity performance "to capture and hold her audiences."[506] Using her body to express a message is one of Truth's more memorable storytelling strategies. The 1858 speech in Silver Lake, Indiana, where she bared her breasts to a

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[504] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 70.
[505] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 18.
[506] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 37.

crowd of anti-abolitionists, "was not a singular event for Truth."[507] Truth was missing a

finger on her right hand, and her back had scars. At many speaking engagements, she

displayed to her audiences the remnants of abuse enslavement inflicted upon her Black

female body. As she told stories, she used her body to emphasize the tragedy of being

enslaved for both Africana men and women. "Truth revalued her exploited flesh and

instilled it with an alternate textual meaning.'"[508] Her performance of revealing her body

coupled with her persuasive rhetoric influenced how her audience thought about the

normalcy of the Black female body being abused, as shown in both pro- and anti-

enslavement media.

Many writers describe Truth as a dynamic speaker and infer that she used vocal

inflections and gestures "to engage an audience in such a way that they not only

participate but, potentially, are transformed in some way."[509] She was very animated

when she talked, gesticulating with her hands to convey emphasis. Sometimes, she sang

songs such as her favorite hymnals, self-written songs, and the occasional improvised

lyrics based on popular songs of the day. As with her use of body, Truth used song to

"breach the bounds of racial barriers, and induce her audience to identify with her, and

other Africana people."[510] At a lecture in Abington, Massachusetts, Truth sings

passionately enough to where her audience begins to shout their approval. "She

improvis[es] a song, commencing, 'Hail! ye abolitionists.' Her voice was both sweet and

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[507] William Lloyd Garrison, "Proslavery in Indiana," *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, 139;* Margaret Washington , *Sojourner Truth's America,* 287.

[508] Alex Black, "Abolitionism's Resonant Bodies: The Realization of African American Performance." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 621.

[509] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 218.

[510] Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziu*, Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, 62.

powerful, and as her notes floated away through the tree-tops, reaching the outermost circle of that vast multitude, it elicited cheer after cheer."[511] In her role as storyteller, Truth aimed to use her performance to "decrease the distance between the storyteller and her audience,"[512] because she was aware that "the audience was a critical factor in social change."[513] In her research about the impact of storytelling, communications scholar Leslie Edwards found "that the most important use of storytelling may be its capacity to develop a sense of self within the listener."[514] Truth could be funny, she could be direct, and she could be inspiring. Truth could "delight her audience with laughter then 'move them to tears'"[515] She practiced placing her listeners "in an altered state of consciousness" as a method in which to 'bond storylisteners to the storyteller."[516]

The Narrative

Truth was a master storyteller in person, but she also used other communication technologies to broaden her reach. She adapted her face-to-face storytelling skills to operate asynchronously in written and visual formats. "She re-interpreted her 'self' through the written word for others to read," and in a photographic image for others to view.[517] Particularly, her 'auto'-biography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* functioned

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[511] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 310.

[512] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 123.

[513] Leslie C. Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation." (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009), 39.

[514] Ibid., 41.

[515] Margaret Washington , *Sojourner Truth's America,* 249.

[516] Ibid.

[517] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 4.

as one of the consumable forms of her identity performance- one that Truth could influence an individual without her being in the room.

Painter cites the financial achievement of Frederick Douglas's 1845 autobiography inspired Truth to write her own biography. On the contrary, Truth was intimately aware of the idea that selling a book about her life and thoughts was a viable source of income. In the midst of the Matthias incident, abolitionist and writer Gilbert Vale interviewed Truth, who at the time was called Isabella, about the Matthias commune and what went on there. He published her version of the events the book, *Fanaticism: Its Source and Influence* and Truth most likely received some of the proceeds of its sale.[518] The success of Douglass' narrative combined with the dissolution of the Northampton community in 1846, her desire to live in her own house, and her frequent lectures in the local anti-slavery lecture circuit probably prompted Truth to pursue writing a biography as a means of generating wealth at this time of her life.

Truth's inability to read and write does diminish the authenticity of her voice in *The Narrative*. The book reads like a dialogue between the two authors - Truth and Olive Gilbert - with Truth driving the conversation and Gilbert commenting occasionally. In the many sections where Truth injects an explanation of the story or uses flourishes in her description of an event, one can see that *The Narrative* is another performance text that documents the legend of her character 'Sojourner Truth,' rather than the history of Truth's action. Painter remarks that much of content for her book "is built from materials that had already been stylized and sanitized. [*The Narrative*] contains stories that she told

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[518] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America,* 125.

countless times on the lecture circuit, and out of which [Truth] had by 1850 distilled much nuance and affect."[519] Truth was indifferent about the authenticity of the text or its use of predictable content. Truth's purpose of her book was not to celebrate her accomplishments similar to many white male writers of the era; instead it was an amalgamation of a storybook, editorial, and archive that functioned as a "a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of the time."[520]

Since *The Narrative* is not about revealing all aspects of Truth, many sections are missing, or replaced with a disclaimer by Truth and Gilbert justifying the exclusion. Truth did not want to present her history like some other narratives of enslavement that were "sensationalist tales of brutality and escape"[521] promoted as white abolitionist propaganda. She did not approve of using the rape and sexual abuse of Africana women as a gimmick for selling books. Truth wanted to tell a story that elevated the mythic status of her alter ego, and presented an alternative vision of the story of Africana women of her time. For example, Truth was sexually assaulted by her last slaveholder John Dumont, yet, Truth points out that that piece of her experience does not need to be included.

> *From [being enslaved by the Dumonts] arose a long series of trials in the life of our heroine, which we must pass over in silence; some from motives of delicacy, and others, because the relation of them might inflict undeserved pain on some now living, whom Isabel remembers only with*

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[519] Nell Irwin Painter, "Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic" *Gender & History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 13.

[520] Jane Tompkins qtd in Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 27.

[521] Christel Temple, "Rescuing the Literary in Black Studies." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (2006): 765.

> *esteem and love; therefore, the reader will not be surprised if our*
> *narrative appears somewhat tame at this point, and may rest assured that*
> *it is not for want of facts, as the most thrilling incidents of this portion of*
> *her life are suppressed.*[522]

Another example of Truth suppressing facts in favor of the overall objective of the book, was in her describing her role in the events at the Matthias commune. When Truth was in New York working in the household of Mr. Elijah Pierson, she met Robert Matthews, who called himself Matthias. He was an iterant preacher from the Rochester, NY area who had began preaching at street corners in the city. While she depicts the personality and history of Matthews and his operations in New York, she does not explain the events that transpired after she moved with him and some of his converts to Sing Sing, NY. In place of exposition, Olive Gilbert and Truth remark, "we do not deem it useful or necessary to give any particulars. Suffice it to say… she happily escaped the contamination that surrounded her, assiduously endeavoring to discharge all her duties in a becoming manner."[523] In this section of her book, she removes a sensational event because it is not a primary to her overarching story. Neither Truth's actions nor her beliefs in the Matthias commune support the political agenda of her later years fighting for Africana and Women's rights. Truth refers her readers to Vale's *Fanaticism* if they so desire to read her version of the events.

Fanaticism and *The Narrative* are similar because they both function as a medium to distribute Truth's telling of a compelling account of events; however, they differ in her strategy of telling the truth. *Fanaticism* was a literal retelling of the events that transpired from Truth's perspective, while her narrative was a series of historical embellishments.

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[522] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 30.
[523] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 96.

The events and actions that Truth regretted from her time with Matthias did not fit the background of her character who was a formerly enslaved Africana preacher woman. Truth named the chapter "the Matthias delusion," to further distance herself from the spectacle, and point the reader to her political commentary on racism and sexism in the United States.

The storyline of the first edition of *The Narrative* ends in the late 1840s, with Truth living at Northampton. She published a second edition in 1876 entitled *The Book of Life.* The first half of *The Book of Life* was a reprint of *The Narrative*, but the second half was a collection of newspaper articles and letters that describe her exploits, with brief explanatory blurbs by her new editor, Frances Titus, to provide context or extra information when needed. *The Book of Life* was drawn from a book Truth carried around with her when she toured. It contained "the autographs of many distinguished personages - the good and great of the land"[524] as well as newspaper clippings, testimonials, and other letters about her deeds.[525]

I claim, "Truth curated her own mythology"[526] through the publishing of *The Book of Life*. Like with her religious and political education, she probably had someone read articles to her, so that she could judge "whether the young sprigs of the press did [her] justice."[527] From her research, Truth selected a compilation of newspaper articles and letters written by other people, and used them to portray an imprecise, but impressive

[524] Francis Gage qtd Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 131.

[525] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America,* 301.

[526] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 238

[527] Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Sojourner Truth on the Press." In *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2: 1861-1876, 926-928. Edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. (Rochester, NY: Privately Published, 1881), 926.

version of her history. By the 1860s, Truth knew that her persona was being appropriated, and she compiled articles of which she approved to reassert control over her representation.[528] The act of including certain individuals' retellings of her stories and excluding others demonstrates Truth authorizing their veracity and thus, she made them canon. For instance, she includes radical feminist and novelist Frances Gage's article describing the 1851 Convention and Harriet Beecher Stowe's article "The Libyan Sybil." Both pieces were published in 1863, but they describe earlier events. Stowe wrote her article to maintain her wealth and fame as a writer. Gage, an activist, wrote her piece in response to Stowe, because she was mortified about Stowe's use of Truth for purely commercial purposes. Neither of these articles were commissioned by Truth, but they both are the source of Truth's most repeatable quotes: "Ar'nt I a woman?" and "Fredrick, is God dead?"

Gage's retelling of Truth's speech at a women's rights convention depicts Truth as a brave Africana woman, bearing her soul to a racist and sexist crowd. She speaks despite audience members worry that her presence would cause newspapers to assume that women's rights were part of abolitionism, and thus dissuade undecided people from supporting (white) women's issues. Gage portrays Truth as a remarkable speaker who eloquently asserts that womanhood is a condition of some Africana people, and that despite what privileges men and whites have, women and Africans should not be denied their rights. At the end of the article, Truth is a supernatural figure. Gage describes her effect on the audience as "magical" because Truth transformed the opponents of women's

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[528] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography.* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 30.

rights criticism "from jibes into notes of respect and admiration."[529] In "the Libyan Sybil," Stowe wrote herself as an advocate for Truth. She related to sculptor William Story the tale of Truth's retort of "Is God dead?" to Frederick Douglass' declaration that Africana people only could claim justice from whites through war. Allegedly inspired by Truth's boldness, Story created a statue called "the Libyan Sybil" that was exhibited at the 1862 World's Exposition. In introducing Truth as the muse for Story's statue, Stowe "fabricated a meeting with Truth," and wrote about Truth's speaking to a few of Stowe's houseguests about various things on her mind. Stowe depicted Truth as "an oddity, speaking in a droll, thick, almost incomprehensible dialect, uttering queer homilies and phrases, and expressing herself with gullibility and foolish reciprocity."[530]

Initially, Truth was upset that Stowe produced a work that reinforced Black stereotypes such as depicting Truth with a southern African American dialect. Truth never lost her Dutch-Africana dialect, and she possessed a "diverse oral repertoire including polished and formal English, and an energized 'down-home' style when she was excited."[531] On the other hand, Stowe seized the icon of Truth and reconstructed her into Stowe's image of "enslaved women: dark-skinned, unschooled, homespun, and religious."[532] A characterization she depicts in her famous work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Washington claims that Truth did not allow the "the Libyan Sybil" to be read to her, and quotes her as saying, "Don't read me that old symbol."[533] However, she must have had someone read it at least once in order for her to respond to it in an 1863 edition of the

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[529] Frances Gage qtd in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 135.
[530] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America,* 301.
[531] Ibid*.,* 277.
[532] Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America,* 271.
[533] Ibid*.,* 302.

Commonwealth Newspaper, three months after Stowe published her article. Truth responds to Stowe's misrepresentation of her speech patterns in particular when she remarks, "I related a story to her and she has put it on me, for I never make use of the word honey."[534] She included "the Libyan Sybil" and Gage's article in her *Book of Life*, most likely because it solidified her celebrity and enhanced the reputation of her public image. After Stowe's article was published, Truth gained the sobriquet, the Libyan Sybil. The term appears in many articles published after 1863, and is part of the caption under the pictures of Truth that graces the first page of the *Book of Life*.

Despite her having to actively confront the distortion that Stowe presented, Truth enjoyed hyperbolic stories about herself.[535] Even though it contained many inaccuracies, "The Libyan Sybil" was read by thousands of people across the nation. Truth reasoned that if she tacitly endorsed the article, she could gather more people at her speaking engagements who would potentially adopt her cause. She responded to Stowe's fictional account with marketing materials that describe her as "the African Sybil, so vividly portrayed by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe."[536] At these lectures, Truth sold *The Narrative*, which at the time "sold for 25 cents apiece."[537]

Truth accepted others making her into a myth, but she preferred to cultivate the style and substance of her mythology. The narrative includes her stories of being thrown off streetcars in Washington D.C., having to reveal that her death was misrepresented,

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[534] Sojourner Truth, "Letter" Boston Commonwealth, June 17, 1863.
[535] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 205.
[536] "Sojourner Truth Speeches and Commentary." Sojourner Truth Institute. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/.
[537] Sojourner Truth, "Letter" Boston Commonwealth, June 17, 1863.

and other astounding exploits detailing Truth's bravery and acclaim. Truth published these various tales into one manuscript, to produce a "narrative that was unstable and fluctuating," and filled with "fissures of discontinuity." *The Narrative's* erratic structure indicates further that it is a text for altering consciousness. Truth disrupts the linearity of a narrative and constructs many of her tales as timeless. Her reader then has to attempt to interpret her text more so as if it were a fictional story, rather than her actual life experiences. Moreover, Truth generated a mythic quality to her 'auto'-biography by "not distinguishing between real and imaginative aspects of her experiences. African American women's literature scholar Johnnie Stover identifies "the creation of fantasy as a highly rated art in the Africana storytelling tradition."[538] Elaborating upon true accounts was a method to "vitalize language, and force the significance of a story to a level where the community's cosmology is the basis of its meaning."[539] The narrative is filled with multiple instances of Truth operating as a storyteller.

Scattered through the work are examples of Truth weaving together pieces of misinformation about her life into her public persona. After the Civil War, a rumor began to circulate that Truth was over 100 years old; She did not fully refute these claims, but instead allowed a mythology to develop about her longevity. It was true that Truth had lived many decades beyond the normal lifespan of Africana people at the time, and she had outlived a couple of her grandchildren. However, Truth knew her age; In *Fanaticism*, (published 1835), James Dumont certifies that Truth lived on his estate since '1810 and

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[538] Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 190.
[539] Ibid.

"at the time she was between 12 and 14 years of age." Vale mentions that Truth is "now about 38 years of age."[540] In latter accounts, Truth was known for her sharp memory; it described as "a vast storehouse of knowledge, the shelves of which contain a history of the revolutions, progressions, and culmination of the great ideas which have been a part of her life purpose."[541] Therefore, one can surmise that she would not have forgotten her age as she grew older. In her story about meeting President Grant, she made the rumors about her age an account of ethics and politics. She recalls the time when many people were asking her about her age and she was providing curt or rude answers. While waiting for an audience with president Grant, she observed how "kind and polite" he was about people asking him about his age, and she decided that she should follow suit. In the end, she just consents to her agedness, "Sometimes folks just quit growing and stop as they is, and I specs that I has just quit growing old and keeps on the same all the time."[542]

The story of her meeting Grant is also an example of Truth embellishing her own moments in history. In the narrative and in articles, Truth made her meetings with presidents and other historical figures into unforgettable stories where she appears extraordinary in comparison to the famous figure she meets. In 1865, "Truth asked Lincoln to exchange a greenback bearing his picture for her photograph; supposedly she said, "It's got a black face but a white back; an' I'd like one o'yourn wid a green

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[540] Gilbert Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c.* New York: Published by G. Vale, No. 84 Roosevelt Street, 1835. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/vale/vale.html, 17

[541] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 254.

[542] Ibid.*,* 224.

back."[543] Historian Carleton Mabee and Grigsby suggest that the story was fabricated to authenticate her meeting with Grant.[544] More significantly, It indicates that Truth "was aware of her own power. She forced others, including politically and economical powerful white men, to recognize that her black womanhood could be acknowledged in a way that did not make her unequal to a man." Truth continuously appears to have the upper hand in many situations because she portrays herself as quick witted, and poignant.

In another anecdotal moment occurring before the Civil War, that depicts the scope of Truth's intelligence, Truth makes a clever quip that refers to her past working as a servant in people's houses and her current struggle fighting enslavement. She states, "Years ago, when I lived in the city of New York, my occupation was scouring brass door knobs; but now I go about scouring copperheads."[545]A final example of Truth's cultivating her mythology is when she portrays her courage in the face of opposition. In 1862, Indiana passed a law to ban Africana people from entering or leaving the state. Truth arranged for an anti-slavery meeting. "A meeting was appointed at the town-house in Angola, but the democrats threatened to burn the building if she attempted to speak in it. To this she made answer, 'Then I will speak upon the ashes.'"[546]

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[543] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations,* 37n43.

[544] Ibid.; Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse, Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend. (New York: New York Press, 1993), 185.

[545] "Sojourner Truth at Abington" in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 311; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113, no. 1, (Winter 2011): 26-27.

Copperheads was the nickname for allied Northern merchants, financiers, cotton manufacturers, and Southern slaveholders who wished to sustain the enslavement of Africana people. It came about from political sides that arose when with the change from coin currency to paper currency during the pre-Civil War years. Those who were pro-Greenbacks were primarily sympathetic to the emancipation of Africana people; those who were anti-abolition were also anti-paper currency, hence they were named after the metal coinage they supported.

[546] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 140

Truth promoted a written narrative of her life that was collection of tales, founded upon her lived experience. It operated as a tool to "influence the consciousness and behavior of others in order to alter their orientation or cognitive style."[547] In multiple instances throughout her life she "deliberately articulates [herself] as an Africana cultural myth"[548] in which to "promote and inspire the imagination and speculation of Africana people. Her fantastical stories based in reality "offered a vision of Africana life not bound by the limitations brought upon Africana people by white cultural domination;" instead, she offers her readership with multiple tales in which an African woman wins; that sparks in them hope and possibility for their own social and intellectual development.

Truth makes herself into an icon

Figure7: Sojourner Truth c 1870s

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[547] Amos Wilson qtd in Christel Temple, "Rescuing the Literary in Black Studies." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (2006): 779.

[548] Christel Temple, "Rescuing the Literary in Black Studies." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (2006): 765.

Truth consistently told memorable stories to maintain the popularity of her message, and control what the public knew about her. She was most effective in person, but she expanded the reach of identity performance when she published her autobiography. Because Truth could not read, the first and second edition of *The Narrative* was not her best display of her storytelling ability. She had to dictate her story to other very opinionated women who would add their own commentary to her text. Moreover, while her written communication pushed readers to challenge their thoughts about Africana women, they required a certain level of privilege to either read or imply emphasis in the text. Her most effective and reproducible performance texts were her photographs. Photographic technology served as a form of writing for Truth; it operated as her signature trademark that she used to "push the boundaries of visual communication to destabilize social and textual boundaries and inspire audience engagement."[549] They were the primary instrument in her arsenal of storytelling that made her into a national icon.

The circulating images of Truth derive from fourteen portraits she sat for between 1863-1875.[550] "Truth precociously embraced the new technology of carte-de-visite photography because it was inexpensive and postal service reforms had made the inclusion of photographs in letters all but free.[551] Being unable to read, Truth understood the potential of photography and embraced the technology. "Photographs did not require literacy skills and thus widened her possible consumer base.…She could reconstruct the

[549] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 221.
[550] Nell Irwin Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*, 198.
[551] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations*, 24.

narrative of her body as a material object; one that remained fully within her autonomous control."[552] Her photographs are another part of her story; they act as a compilation of symbols that can be interpreted, and provoke assumptions about her. Truth's photographs depict a message with images, rather than words. They are a static visual representation of the "Sojourner Truth character" that the storyteller wants her listeners to see.

Truth demonstrated her agential capabilities through her photographs. She practiced generating her own reality by using photographic technology to craft how she was seen, challenge how others would see her race and gender, and communicate that the photograph was not a truthful representation, but a political one. Truth positioned herself as the one who has control over her image. The photograph is a tool, a product of human industry, and Sojourner Truth is its user. Truth collaborated with a few photographers to construct scenes of domesticity that would turn Truth into a "genteel, modern, woman."[553] In the portraits, Truth is sitting or standing next to a table, wearing a dark colored dress, with a white shawl draped over her shoulders. Her hands hold knitting needles, her purse, or her cane. The backgrounds of the photographs simulate that Truth is sitting in a nice house, as assumed by the style of furniture and the placement of flowers on the table. They are subtle features that do not monopolize the image, and allow Truth to stand out in the frame. She does not include anything in the picture that labels her as a former slave--a conscious move on her part to distance her image from other abolitionist photographs that portrayed scarred backs to elicit a sympathetic

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[552] Ibid., 297.
[553] Celeste-Marie Bernier, ""Tickety-ump-ump-nicky Nacky:" Re-Creating, Reknowing, and Refiguring Sojourner Truth." in *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 208.

response from viewers. "In fact, Truth took pains to conceal the stub of her right index finger, which was cut off by a scythe during her last year in bondage."[554]

Truth appropriates "the visual iconography of feminine domesticity to depict herself as a matronly woman of means."[555] She positioned her Black woman body next to symbolic markers of middle-class white womanhood, such as flowers or the material of her dress and made use of the "rhetoric of the pose that was already well-established by the 1850s"[556] to connect these attributes to the visual signifiers of Black womanhood. "By centering herself among sentimental props, Truth employed photography to illustrate a different understanding of blackness and racialized womanhood."[557] During her era, Africana women were not associated with humanity, let alone middle class womanhood. In popular media, they were depicted as grotesque or animal-like.

Truth's representation in photographs can be seen as a performance text that attempts "to re-codify the meanings of Black womanhood in the 1860s and 1870s."[558] "She attempts to convey in her photographs is what largely was considered an oxymoron in the nineteenth-century: a Black lady."[559] Political scientist Julia Jordan-Zachery argues that the concept of a lady in a United States context "is tied to race rather than to essential character traits or behavior." [560] In other words, being a lady has a societal value. She has roles and rights that are protected by social customs. A lady contributes positively to the

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[554] Mandy Reid, Early Popular Visual Culture, 299.
[555] Ibid.
[556] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counter-History of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 148
[557] Reid, 297.
[558] Ibid, 296.
[559] Reid, 299.
[560] Julia Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy,* 32.

social structure. Because of the racist infrastructure that devalues Africana women, their race denies them the ability to be a deemed a lady; The denial of Africana women from this gendered classification adds to the intersectional oppression of Africana women. They are first discriminated against because of their cultural identity and phenotypical presentation, but they are additionally oppressed because white society does not view them as respectable women, and treats them similarly to sex workers.[561]

Truth, as was the convention in mid – late 19th century, called the photographs her *shadows*. In 1867, she told the newspaper *New York World*: "I do not carry 'rations' in my bag; I keep my shadow there."[562] Shadows, in both its 19th century colloquialism and the standard definition, are only a representation of an actual object. Industrialization strengthened the significance of shadows to mainstream American society, because photographs could be reproduced quickly, but also because thoughts in written, pictorial, or audial forms could be transmitted without the speaker being present. Truth used this change in knowledge dissemination to her advantage. She was aware that shadows, like stereotypes, were gaining power over the public imagination. Truth did not perform a white female domesticity in her real life. "She did not fit neatly into patterns of behavior expected of blacks, or of women."[563] Her photographs depict Truth sitting quietly in a house as though she was caught in the middle of knitting and reading; however, her cartes-de-visite "incorporated a wide array of tropes and motifs in order to obscure

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[561] Ibid.

[562] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations*, 29-30.

[563] Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse, Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend. (New York: New York Press, 1993), 185.

superficial reimagines of the Black woman experience as manufactured within white mainstream imagination." [564]

Truth smoked for most of her life, a habit that she did not give up until much later in her life, but in her photographs, she is never seen with her clay pipe. In a few of the photographs, she is sitting next to an open book, although she was illiterate. Truth did not have a soft speaking voice or style; she was described as being boisterous, sarcastic, and would show her anger in public spaces. Gage described Truth's cadence at the 1851 Ohio Convention speech like a "rolling thunder."[565] She harnessed the symbols of white female domesticity "to create a new understanding of [Black womanhood], one in which images and symbols were put into circulation for *Black* benefit."[566] Truth challenged white assumptions about Africana women by coercing viewers to quickly associate her image with the markers of respectable femininity. In her photographs, "Truth defied 'the racial stereotypes embedded in her nation's language,' by showing Black womanhood as one would see white womanhood, through her prim and proper dress, demure gaze and position within a quaint domestic space."[567]

Truth re-classified the symbols of white womanhood to be universally applicable to all peoples, and she re-signified the meaning of the selling the Black woman body. Truth expressed an aspect of her free status by actively selling her visual image. She was intimately aware of "the implications of the sale of her own image. In 1870, she said that she herself 'used to be sold for other people's benefit, but now she sold herself for her

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[564] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 221.

[565] Frances Gage, "Truth," *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 134.

[566] Mandy Reid, *Early Popular Visual Culture,* 286.

[567] Mandy Reid, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 301.

own.'"[568] Her photograph supported her tours and travels. Truth consistently carried her photographs, and sold them at numerous events and through the mail.

> *She exploited the publicity provided by the press, asking editors to publish letters indicating where and how to buy her photographs. In a letter of 13 February 1864, published in the Anti-Slavery Standard, Truth stipulated: 'My friends who send for photographs should not forget to enclose a stamp for postage.'*[569]

The photographs afforded her the ability to live comfortably as a free Africana woman in 19th century America, because their sale "paid for food, repaid debts, and helped her buy other forms of property, including her house in Michigan."[570] To support her activism, Truth constantly sold her image. A newspaper announcement about her lecture at a Methodist church in Massachusetts, stated, "Don't forget that she has photographs of herself for sale her only means of support for expenses of travel, livelihood, and a humble home in Michigan and that she 'sells the shadow to support the substance.'"[571] In Philadelphia, Truth lectured at the Friends Meeting House on Lombard Street. Afterwards, "a number of persons went forward and bought copies."[572] This practice, while giving Truth an income, also distributed the image that she embedded with symbols to a wide swath of people. Truth even included the selling of her shadows in her write up about meeting president Grant. "I then handed him two of my photographs, which he took, and putting one in his pocketbook, he laid the other on the

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[568] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Representations*, 19-20.
[569] Ibid., 24.
[570] Ibid., 24.
[571] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 203.
[572] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 224.

table and gave me a five dollar bill, for which I thanked him.[573] Through her photographs, she signified to a wide audience that those who had Black skin were human.

Truth inhabited a position of self-ownership over the Black female body. She held the power over what image was sold and to whom it was sold. Her drive for economic self-sufficiency led her to transgress the meaning of selling the Black woman's body from an activity of white domination to one of Africana empowerment. "Her photographs doubled as a both a generator of income to sustain Truth, but also a tool of propaganda used to shift the public image of Africana women. By controlling the construction and sale of her visual image, Truth disrupted how Africana women were viewed nationally.[574] "Truth distributed an image of herself embedded with her vision of a future in which slavery and racism did not stigmatize and constrain all Black Americans."[575] Both her juxtaposing the symbols of black skin and white woman domesticity and her taking ownership over the creating and selling of her own imagery are a blatant criticism of the status quo that perceived Africana women as inhuman and property. Truth used her photographs and the act of selling them as part of her storytelling strategy to influence others using multiple means of communication about the future condition of Africana people. She was telling the story of African people being liberated from the oppressive conditions to the point that they control their social development.

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[573] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 273-75.
[574] Mandy Reid, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 301.
[575] Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer. *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 16.

Bernier remarks, "Sojourner Truth was possibly more famous for her *cartes-de-visite* than for her actual presence in abolition meetings.'"[576] Although her orations did induce harmony between the listener and the storyteller, their influence was limited by the memory of the listener. *The Narrative* was a powerful story, but it was limited by the imagination and literacy of the reader. Her photographs however, could impose a lasting adjustment on the viewer as they repeatedly displayed her vision of Black womanhood. They affected people's perceptions because the medium of photography tricked the mind into believing that what exists in the photograph is reality. Viewing cartes-de-viste was a popular past-time in the United States, and her image would have been frequently seen by those who owned it and she would be seen in tandem with photographs of family members, friends, and other celebrities of the era. She would continue to tell a story long after Truth herself had stopped giving speaking engagements across the United States.

Truth was a storyteller who "created a visual archive of a Black woman construct in order to establish Africana women's ownership over their own iconography."[577] She did this to give future generations of Black women the ability to use their representation in media to cultivate Africana futures. Painter asserts, "thanks to her success in distributing her cartes-de-viste widely, the figure and image of Sojourner Truth continues to proliferated into the late twentieth [and early twenty-first centuries]."[578] Her photograph proliferated as an artifact of Africana women's knowledge production, and

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[576] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 205.

[577] Ibid., 205.

[578] Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol,* 273.

endured decades as a relevant criticism to the fluctuating externally defined myths of Black womanhood.

End

Enslavement rendered it a normal practice to perceive Africana women from a white supremacist perspective. Their bodies were considered a resource for European-American capitalist development and a foundation to construct mythologies in which to uphold the hegemony of white culture and physiology. Instead of being interrogated from their own cultural guidelines, Africana women were characterized by a multitude of signifiers of dehumanization. Africana women were imbued "with a mythical prejudice from which there was no easy way for the agents buried beneath them"[579] to act effectively in support of their own culture's continuation.

Truth used her ability to perform multiple modes of her identity as a rite of resistance. She practiced varying styles of storytelling through verbal, written, and visual technologies, in order to perfect the technique of shaping the hearts and minds of her consumers. Truth influenced her readers to interrogate her identity performance by disrupting their unconscious consumption of Africana women's images with clever remarks, peculiar symbolic pairings, or disjointed but sensational tales. She makes her audience uneasy with the status quo so that they are unable to rebuild their perceptions of a debased Black womanhood so easily. Truth "engaged in a process of education that encourages critical consciousness and enables her audience to break from hegemonic

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[579] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, (1987): 65.

images of blackness."[580] Being a storyteller, Truth blurred the "boundary between fact and fiction;" she combined her narratives and speeches "with elements of propaganda, history, and fictionalized elements, such as re-imagined dialogue."[581] She associated herself with a varying array of symbols, ranging from white woman domesticity to radical Africana woman activism, in order to diversify the interpretations of her persona.

> *Her plethora of photographs, speeches, songs, and 'auto' biographies all attest to her resistance to "essences" of any kind, be they biologically fixed definitions of motherhood, scientific labels of racial difference, political identifications as activist outsider, or even historical representations as an enslaved fugitive.*[582]

Her practice of consistently creating and deconstructing the meaning of her image operated as a method to destabilize mythologies about Africana women.[583] Truth defied an ordinary historicization of who she was by aggressively promoting her embellished and symbol-laden stories.

Truth occupied a space where she was both a performance and a performer. She made her performance of identity – her storytelling alter ego - "a resource,"[584] that held a more complex interpretation of Africana people and Black womanhood. Truth was aware of the power of representation to affect Africana women's imagination of Africana possibilities and she used her iconic status as critical intervention of the oppression of African people due to myths constructed to maintain white cultural domination. The

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[580] bell hooks, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics,* 96.
[581] Holly Gorman, "Captivity and Conflict: A Study of Gender, Genre, and Religious Others." (dissertation, Temple University, 2015), 72.
[582] Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, 205.
[583] Ibid., 205.
[584] Amy C. Wilkins, "Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2012): 173-96.

storyteller of Sojourner Truth employed her performance texts as a tool to "elevate and sustain [Africana women] for the challenges ahead."[585]

Analyzing Sojourner Truth's liberation technologies uncovers a series of complex but effective techniques of using identity performance to disrupt white culture domination, as well as to inspire Africana women. Documenting her process provides a model of how some African women operate their performance texts to affect their environments for the liberation of Africana people.

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[585] Kariamu Welsh and Molefi Kete Asante, "Myth: The Communication Dimension to the African American Mind." *Journal of Black Studies* 11, no. 4. (June 1981): 395.

CHAPTER 4: JANELLE MONÁE

Sojourner Truth lived at the start of media's saturation of Americans with representational imagery. In her time, her challenge was to understand quickly the impact of new communication technologies so that she could counter the effects of a mass-produced degradation of Africana people. Eventually, Truth used the new technologies to advocate effectively her Africana liberation objectives. Over a hundred years later, visual representation has become a pervasive method to convey codified information. "We are often dependent upon the media to inform us about the world we live in. They serve as one of the primary sources for the dissemination and reinforcement of images of African American femininity."[586] Africana people and mainstream American society have been trained to thoughtlessly translate the tropes and themes they read in many newspapers, internet sites, magazines, and billboards. In this environment, grabbing the attention of a media-oversaturated populace in order to raise his or her consciousness is a daunting challenge for anyone. It is almost "crazy" to supply the populace with a non-stereotypical Black womanhood and expect it to influence how Africana people perceive themselves.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary moment, singer/songwriter/producer Janelle Monáe accepts the challenge to transform how Africana women obtain, interpret, and embody alternative and liberatory performances of Black womanhood. She presents herself and her visions of the "other" as texts to be read, understood, and tried. Monáe

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[586] Deborah A. Harmon and Donna Y. Ford, "The Experiences of Gifted African American Females: 'Damned if You Are and Damned if You Aren't,' In *African American Females: Addressing Challenges and Nurturing the Future.*" eds. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher and Vernon C. Polite (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 50.

uses her brand of aesthetics as a tactic. She uses both her sartorial choices, and her folktale to "manipulate the lexicon and mannerism of the hearers [or viewers] of her performance texts."[587] Her uniform - the black and white suit she wears during performances and in music videos- and her folktale featuring the Android Cindi Mayweather- who undergoes enslavement, emancipation, fugitivity, and freedom, - "illuminates [Africana women's] place in history in ways that challenge and interrogate, and highlight the shifting nature of Black experience."[588] Monáe works as a musical performer who uses her interviews, songs, music videos, and other media productions to expose the masses to an eccentric and variable Black womanhood. In a small but significant way, Monáe, through her identity performance, has increased the ability of Africana women to personify Black womanhood in ways that contribute to and support Africana social development.

In examining Monáe's strategies and tactics that affect how Black women wear her brand of womanhood, I reused and modified the structure of the previous chapter on Sojourner Truth. First, there is an examination of the representation of Africana women in 21st century United States public media, followed by a brief review of literature that analyzes Monáe's application of her identity. I present a brief biography of Monáe to give context to her process of critical thinking and from there, I conduct a textual analysis of her performance texts to demonstrate how they operate as liberation technologies.

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[587] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Rev. and Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 50.
[588] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 220.

Figure 8: Beyoncé Knowles, Michelle Obama, and Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope

During and after the age of American industrialization, advances in

communication technologies, such as telephones, radios, photographs, copy machines,

televisions, computers, etc. increased the prevalence of stereotypes of Black women. In

the 20th century, there was a regular vacillation between the dominance of the creation or

refashioning of EDMs of Black women on one hand, and the widespread response of

African women to the stereotypes on the other. Even though legal enslavement and

segregation have been abolished in the United States, the media representation of

Africana women in television, movies, or news broadcasts still reflects a society

dependent upon the diminishment and dehumanization of Africana women. Television

and the internet are the leading locations where people worldwide consume images of

Africana woman. Yet, due to its speed, accessibility, and relative proximity (seeing an

EDM is as easy as reaching into your pocket and opening an app on your cell phone),

stereotypes of Black women seem ubiquitous and universal. [589] Media is a significant

pedagogical tool with which to learn about oneself and of others.

U.S. society insists on supporting and reproducing tropes that benefit white

society's negotiations with Black bodies and does not allow Black women to witness

realistic or culturally affirming images of themselves. Media's proliferation of EDMs of

Black women pose an obstacle to Africana women's lives because "they demonstrate

inaccuracies regarding how Black women should look or act,"[590] how they navigate their

spaces, and what they want to emulate. Over the last ten years, Black women have been

exposed to and accepting of a few new composites of Black womanhood as embodied by

the entertainer Beyoncé, First Lady Michelle Obama, and characterized through Olivia

Pope, the protagonist of the television drama, *Scandal*. These newer tropes are constantly

critiqued as being revamped stereotypes; "Although popular culture offers what seems

like fresh, new perspective on Black women's representations,"[591] many Africana women

consider if the shifting representations will up as just a reversion to previous imaginings

of exaggerated, simplified, or dehumanized characterizations of Black women.

> *Representation changes minds and cements biases. Black women and girls*
> *suffer from seeing limited and/or relentlessly negative reflections of*
> *themselves in the media. Those limited images reinforce stereotypes about*
> *black women and often prevent people from recognizing their humanity.*
> *They burden black women in their real, everyday lives.[592]*

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[589] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 256.
[590] "Black Women, Television and Stereotypical Roles." *Call & Post,* Mar 18, 1993.
http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/238451477?accountid=14270.
[591] Nina Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture
Representations." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 151.
[592] Harris, Tamara Winfrey. "No Disrespect" BitchMedia. May 2012. Accessed September 1,
2015. http://bitchmagazine.org/article/no-disrespect.

Beyoncé, Michelle Obama, and Pope represent other pernicious and benevolent Black womanhood characteristics that Africana women can mobilize around or criticize to reevaluate the meaning and depiction of Black womanhood.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles (stage name "Beyoncé) is a singer/actress from Houston, Texas who started her music career when she and a few of her friends formed the singing-rapping group "Girl's Tyme" in 1990. In 1996, the group renamed themselves Destiny's Child and signed a record contract with Columbia Records. As Destiny's Child, their 1999 album "The Writing's on the Wall" won two Grammys' and four of their songs became R&B hits: "Bills, Bills, Bills," "Bug a Boo", "Jumpin', Jumpin'," and "Say My Name." After 2000, Beyoncé and other members of the group began pursuing solo careers. In 2003, Beyoncé released "Dangerously in Love" that began her ascent to becoming the wealthiest, internationally renowned, Black female entertainers, as well as a powerful icon of Black womanhood. Her marriage to rapper and entrepreneur Shawn Corey Carter (stage name Jay-Z) increased her fame and visibility, and in 2006, *Time Magazine* ranked them as two of the 100 most influential people. Besides her albums, and music videos, Beyoncé appears in numerous media formats including acting in films such as *Austin Powers in Goldmember* and *Dreamgirls*. She poses for magazine covers, such as Vogue, GQ, Ebony, and Essence, and her fans choose to intake her image on various social media platforms. Sixty-three million people like her Facebook page, fourteen million follow her on Twitter, and she has thirty-one million Instagram followers.

Contemporarily, she has become one of the quintessential representations of R&B Black womanhood and does not challenge stereotypical depictions of Black women. Instead, she portrays herself as a talented singer and dancer with sex appeal. "Beyoncé

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has been easier for the public to accept because she is an entertainer, a long-accepted role for Black women and as a light-skinned, Black female sex symbol, she does not present a threat to established categories."[593] She exhibits a white-American beauty standard that prefers tanned fair-skinned, straight, blond hair and rounded angular features as she consistently dyes her hair blond or wears wigs and hair extensions to lengthen the look of her hair. Her skin is often lightened beyond its natural complexion in advertisements and on her album covers. Beyoncé performs in a hyper-sexualized (and predominately heteronormative) sexuality that directs her audience to focus upon her body. Her concerts and staged performances are impressive and recognizable because of her and her backup dancers' intricate choreography, her range of musical styles and genres, as well as her costumes that often are tight on her skin, and accentuate her curves, breasts, and buttocks. Beyoncé often uses her lyrics, her facial expressions, and her body to initiate a sexual response in her audiences, as exampled by her use of innuendo in song lyrics ("Can you eat my skittles"), opening her legs during dance routines, and licking her lips. "Beyoncé fits into the niche of the mixed race or ethnically ambiguous woman who is considered beautiful because of her phenotypically white features and sexual because of her Black 'blood.'" [594]

Beyoncé is part of the lineage of Black women musicians who gain social status and wealth, but their presence does not positively affect how mainstream American society interprets other Black women. Their role as entertainers has been a position

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[593] Farah Griffin, "At Last . . . ?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History," *Dædalus* (Winter 2011): 141.
[594] Ibid., 138.

considered suitable for Black women. Their talent is accepted due to its superficial or

sexual nature. "This acceptance suggests a continued devaluation of Black people, their

history, and their experiences."[595] Many Black women consume her music and her

appreciate her aesthetic, but they also understand the harm her presence causes upon their

own ability to negotiate unique, non-Beyoncé-like identities. "[Beyoncé] is an image that

did not reflect the reality of their lives or other Blacks or young women."[596] In a 2014

study on Black youths' perceptions of Black women in popular media, a young woman

stated, "Beyoncé is this huge name, related to Blacks in general—huge icon for Black

females—I don't want to be portrayed as this, if this is what you are relating me to."[597]

Michelle Obama (nee Robinson) is the spouse of the 44th president of the United

States, Barack Obama, and the mother of Malia and Sasha Obama. She is a graduate of

Princeton University and Harvard Law School. She has worked at various law firms, non-

profit organizations, and universities. As First Lady, Michelle Obama launched the Let's

Move campaign, a program aiming to combat childhood obesity in the United States by

encouraging children (and their parents) to increase their physical activities and

consumption of healthier foods. She has traveled across the country making speeches and

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[595] Ibid., 141.

[596] Valerie Adams-Bass N., Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and Howard C. Stevenson. "That's Not Me I See on TV . . .: African American Youth Interpret Media Images of Black Females." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 1 (2014): 89.

[597] Ibid.; Beyoncé and her music artist contemporaries. e.g. Nicki Minaj and Rhianna, present a Black womanhood in their music videos and concert performances that centers on their sexual prowess. In criticizing the propagation of this identity I do not wish to reinforce a respectability politics towards that Black women entertainers by categorizing their self-defined imagery of Black female sexuality as an inherently exploitative, improper, or inauthentic "ideal" Black womanhood. Alternatively, I assert that these performers promote a Black woman's employment of erotic politics that endorses heteronormativity, a masculine gaze, and the sexualizing of the nude "female" body. Their type of erotic expression is not the subject of this dissertation, but the reinforcement of their model of Black female sexual expression as normal or usual at the expense of other methods of sexual expression is the subject of inquiry when we examine Monáe's identity performance.

appearances promoting her initiative and campaigning for her spouse's election or his federal proposals. She appears on television and in social media as a representative of the office of the president and as a symbol of the standing of women in American society. Michelle Obama is praised as the first African-American First Lady of the United States. Obama's critics use the intersecting markers of her race and her womanhood to demonstrate that she and her spouse are un-American, and thereby, the Obamas are unfit to represent the nation. Conversely, her admirers hold Michelle Obama as a figure of an idealistic, respectable, "middle-class," Black womanhood.

The racial/cultural identity of the Obamas has been a point of interest in media, popular culture, and politics, during Barack Obama's presidency. The public perception the 44th president and his family in this era of post-racial politics is thought-provoking because of two underlying beliefs perpetuated in the American consciousness: 1, America is a white, heterosexual, patriarchic nation, and 2, the political influence of non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male constituents implies the country is turning away from the foundational ideals of the United States and heading towards a 'dark' future. In 2008, Michelle Obama displayed the dynamic interplay of being a Black woman who is a descendant of enslaved Africans, claims ownership of the moral trajectory of the United States, and who speaks on the behalf of a Black presidential candidate. In a campaign speech for her husband, she stated, "for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country … not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people

are hungry for change."[598] Her statement is a prime example of an African American sentiment that being critical of the actions or inactions of the United States is a component of nationalism. The criticisms towards Michelle Obama's statement attacked her commitment to the nation and her assumptions about the impact an African-descendent U.S. commander in chief has on the systemic character of the state. The level of backlash she received mirrored the discomfort the majority of Americans have about segments of the population whose voices have been hidden, ignored, or misunderstood airing their grievances, even minor ones, against the dominance of the white heterosexual male meritocratic progressive narrative as the ideal model of citizenship.

The Obamas' obvious racial difference from previous United States presidential families evokes the sordid historical past of race relations in the United States- a past that does not align with the rhetoric of the U.S. operating as the perfect democratic union "with liberty and justice for all." Their presence in the White House reveals a few of the quintessential problems of the American capitalist republic. In their role as the First Family, the Obamas act as the primary representations of America to the country and the world. Because they are of Africana descent, the Obamas are a reminder of the (financial and psychological) legacy of enslavement on the American landscape, the decades of Africana people being treated as second class, and the resultant criticisms from the African American populace about the inactions and actions of the state. The legacy of Black resistance to white cultural domination evokes fear in many citizens that in the future, the privileged class of Americans will not be predominately white, heterosexual,

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[598]Farah Griffin. "At Last . . . ?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History." *Dædalus* (Winter 2011): 134.

or male. "Journalist Diane McWhorter discussed the primitive fear of white people is that an African-American leader of the free world will give away their white skin privilege."[599] Harsh judgments towards President Obamas' administration are not aimed at his documented policies, but, towards the assumption that "white people will have to give up the 'implicit acceptance of whiteness as virtuous, normal, unremarkable, and expected' a position they have taken for granted over the years."[600]

Even as First Lady, Michelle Obama has had to endure "negative portrayals of her as unpatriotic, unfeminine, emasculating, and untrustworthy."[601] These criticisms employ the same stereotypical forms that show the dehumanization of her race and her distance from whiteness, white womanhood, and white perceptions of humanity.[602] She has been "caricatured as a Sapphire-like loud-mouth matriarch," a monkey, and a 1960s Black Nationalist militant in army fatigues, donning an Afro and carrying an automatic rifle.[603] These depictions distributed in multiple media serve to maintain the status quo and thereby depower the significance that the appearance of a non-stereotyped, living, complex Black womanhood has on the presumptions of its citizens and the global community about the character of the United States.

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[599] Diane McWhorter qtd in Michael P. Jeffries, *Paint the White House Black: Barack Obama and the Meaning of Race in America*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1.
[600] Ibid., 2.
[601] Brittney Cooper, "A'n't I a Lady?: Race Women, Michelle Obama, and the Ever-expanding Democratic Imagination." *MELUS* 35 (April 2010): 41.
[602] Ibid., 41.
[603] Farah Griffin, *Dædalus*, 136;
The July 2008 New Yorker cover depicted Barack Obama in an outfit reminiscent of Osama bin Laden. The magazine claims they were doing satire in regards to the alleged absurdity of the amount of racist and unfounded comments about the Obamas in the media.

Alternatively "Michelle Obama offers a new image of the First Lady by virtue of her African descent," that creates a discursive opening for envisioning Africana women - (mostly those of the middle and upper classes) as "ladies" and "expands the limiting definitions of womanhood to communities of color."[604] The ubiquitous nature of Black women stereotypes universalizes the economic and personal characteristics of Black women and creates a premise that all Africana women are or were formerly lower income individuals (with negative social traits such bad mothering and 'too independent'). Those who have achieved a social class above working class, such as Congresswomen, presidential staffers, entrepreneurs, media figures, doctors, lawyers, etc. – find that they do not achieve the full benefits of being a higher social class because their race lowers their social status. Their class is impacted by racism and patriarchy, which are oppressions endemic with identification with Blackness. Black "ladies" are often read as derivatives of the traditional Black womanhood stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire except in fancier clothes. The "stereotypical representations of African American women and their bodies still abound in the American imagination" for any class level.[605] "While she performs the duties of the First Lady, Michelle Obama is introducing a new concept of Black womanhood to Africana women and the nation."[606] She is not a reiteration of the problematic role of the Black women entertainer who gains wealth and fame because of her participation in perpetuating Black and Black women stereotypes. By virtue of her position and despite the stereotypical criticism applied to

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[604] Margaret Quilan, Benjamin R. Bates, Jennifer B. Webb, "Michelle Obama 'Got Back': (Re)Defining (Counter)Stereotypes of Black Females." *Women and Language* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 124; Brittney Cooper, *MELUS*, 41, 55.

[605] Brittney Cooper, *MELUS,* 51.

[606] Margaret, Quilan, Benjamin R. Bates, Jennifer B. Webb, *Women and Language*, 119.

her, Michelle Obama has been thrust into the limelight as an image of an affluent Black woman who remains a doting wife to her spouse and actively positions herself as the mother of her children.

Many feminists are "disturbed by Michelle Obama's retreat into the conservative position of wife and mother; however, they do not take into consideration her position in relation to the history of American social practices impeding upon Africana women's relationships with their spouses and children. During the historical eras of enslavement and segregation, Black women were often denied the ability to claim the status of motherhood or wife. The practice of slave owners selling family members, the KKK and lynching mobs killing Africana people - primarily Black men, and the condition of domestic labor that required Africana women to spend days and nights in the homes of their white employers - limited their ability to mother their own children and nurture their partnerships. "So when a Black woman claims public ownership of her children she helps rewrite that ugly history."[607]

Like Beyoncé, images of Michelle Obama are available to Africana woman nationwide. As the spouse of the President of the United States, she portrays herself as the ideal American (woman) symbol; however, because American society conceives Black people as representations of their race and not as individual actors, she has influence on how the nation perceives Africana women. Many members of the Black community praise her role as a mother and a wife because it falls in step with respectability politics: She received an education. She married a man. She is a Christian.

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[607] Melissa Harris-Perry qtd in Brittney Cooper, *MELUS,* 50.

She had children after marriage and stayed with her spouse. She does not emasculate Barack Obama. She is not on public assistance. She does not appear overtly sexual or indecent by conservative standards. Michelle Obama's performance of her Black womanhood does not liberate Africana women to pursue the spectrum of their womanhood possibilities, but may "help to expand America's 'democratic imagination,'" i.e. resurface the racial/gender/class status make-up of those who constitute the American democracy. She "negotiates the minefield of race, gender, and nationalism in the twenty-first century," and provides a model that to which a small percentage of Africana women can emulate and strive.[608]

On Thursday nights, the ABC political drama *Scandal*, created by African American woman television writer Shonda Rhimes, reaches an audience of over 3 million viewers and "ranks as the top watched show among 18 to 34-year-olds."[609] The series revolves around Olivia Pope, played by actor Kerry Washington, "a crisis management expert, aka "fixer," who – with her staff - manages high-profile media scandals in metropolitan Washington, D.C."[610] Television critics and fans praised Rhimes for inserting diversity in the ABC line-up of shows, because Pope is the first African-American female lead in a primetime network drama since the eponymous crime drama, "Get Christy Love" aired over 40 years ago.[611] The racial characterization of Pope

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[608] Brittney Cooper, *MELUS,* 40.

[609] Tanzina Vega, "A Show Makes Friends and History." *The New York Times*. January 16, 2013. Accessed April 27, 2015.

[610] Valerie Adams-Bass N., Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and Howard C. Stevenson, *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, 80.

[611] *Get Christy Love* was a drama about Christie Love, performed by actor Teresa Graves, an undercover police detective working to overthrow a drug ring. It aired on Wednesday nights between September 1974-April 1975 on the ABC network.

challenges media presumptions that African American characters cannot garner high ratings on national television. Her presence is not completely a stereotype. The show displays a complex character who exhibits a Black woman respectability political fantasy.

Within the last five years, Olivia Pope has become another example of an alternative Black womanhood image that is widely distributed in United States' media and worldwide. Her relative power within her universe, financial stability, heterosexual desirability, strong attitude under most circumstances, sexually openness, fashion forwardness, etc. are the basis of a new EDM of Black womanhood. The popularity of the show "How to Get Away with Murder" (produced by Shonda Rhimes and written by Peter Nowalk) and its main character's similarity to Pope demonstrates that this configuration of Black womanhood is reproducible and marketable.

Pope is not a simple stereotype. She is not a direct descendant of Mammy, Sapphire, or Jezebel. She does exhibit the "Black lady" stereotype, but she is sexual. ["The Black lady image is designed to counter claims of Black women's promiscuity. Achieving middle-class status means that Black women have rejected the unbridled "freaky" sexuality now attributed primarily to working-class Black women."[612]] Conversely, she is a complex character. Her interactions with other white characters on the show appear as if they all are social equals. Due to her status as employer to several of the white characters, and her connections with politically and economically powerful people, she has a higher social status. She is independent; her independency is often characterized as an asset to her occupation. Her engagement with her sexuality is often as

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[612] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 139.

the passive recipient of others sexual advances. The nuances of Pope's actions provoke audiences to question how they should position Pope within the spectrum of negative or positive Africana women depictions. The creator and writers of the show are acutely aware of the significance her racial identity has on how people interpret her actions and often they write character dialogue to address these public discussions about Pope's proximity to the classic Black woman representations. After public commentary that the relationship between Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant III was similar to the relationship between Sally Hemings to Thomas Jefferson, in the 12th episode of the second season, which aired December 6, 2012, Pope exasperatedly expressed to the Grant, "I feel a little Sally Hemming's/Thomas Jefferson about all this." Olivia Pope, like Michelle Obama, is a Black woman who does not reiterate the mythology that all Black women have low-income, lower-class backgrounds, and "sassy" personas. She allegedly portrays the experiences of upwardly mobile, economically and politically successful Black women.

Fans of Pope flock to her image because the character is fantastical. Pope is a Black woman who is well integrated into the upper echelons of capitalist American society. She is desired by many socially powerful men – presidents, senators, and other governmental leaders. In the show, the president desires Pope over his own white wife. Pope's gender and race do not negate her social status or influence.[613] She inhabits a universe where "she is judged by her merit" and the historical reality that African American women have had "limited access to social resources and institutions" has

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[613] Janie Filoteo, "ABC's Scandal" *Humanity & Society* 38, no. 2 (2014): 213.

minimal impact on her character development or the plot of the show.[614] For Pope, her race is an aspect of her total identity that accents the situations which she encounters. Her race has little effect upon her social, political, or economic movements.[615] African American women may use Pope as a vehicle to escape their daily negotiations of their gender and racial identities with other members of society, because she "reverberates the allure [and perceived acceptance] of Black respectability," with a hint of gossip.[616] On the show, her professional accomplishments "provide an image upon which to ground a public narrative around the successes of middle class Black women."[617]

The general lack of a multitude of Black women characters in media compels Africana women to concentrate on the few that are presented to them. They see Pope as a positive measurement of both their personal endeavors and socioeconomic aspirations. The influence of race on Pope's life "initiates a discourse that questions if practicing 'race as a personal identity' should be a goal for Black women."[618] "Recognizing race as just an interior condition –as something Pope just possesses without negative effect on her life - is a dangerous presupposition in a society where race remains a problem for everyone."[619] The lack of any mention in the story of Pope having difficulty in her professional or personal life due to her race, puts a level of fantasy in the show. Thousands of Africana women are allowed for an hour to a week to exist in her world

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[614] Ibid.

[615] Utz McKnight, "The Fantastic Olivia Pope: The Construction of a Black Feminist Subject." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3/4 (2014) 187.

[616] Nina Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 154.

[617] Utz McKnight, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society,* 196.

[618] Ibid.

[619] Ibid.

and dream that in their real lives they should aim for a future where race is solely a personal quality and not social issue. This racial fantasy is problematic, because millions of people, who believe the post-racial myth, cite Pope as an example of Black women's lives.

The multifacetedness of Rhimes's protagonist has provoked a revisiting of the interrogations about Black women's relationship to their media representations. A few authors suggest that Pope is a repackaged stereotype, but her possession of economic and political power, diminishes her appearance "as jezebel and mammy."[620] She acts as a co-conspirator to a plantation hierarchical structure as the fixer (in both operational and sexual ways) of white men and white women who are the masters and mistresses of the "white" house while simultaneously donning the façade of an agent "of Black social mobility."[621] A few authors assert that her stereotypical aspects are overlooked or rationalized away because Africana women are "so desperate for Black female images that each image has to be everything to every Black woman."[622] On the other hand, Pope is construed as a new and popular way to exist as Black in the United States.[623] Scandal "audience members contest the construal of Pope as a modern-day Mammy, Sapphire, or Jezebel" and question the limitations of the traditional Black women tropes as accurate methodologies upon which to analyze her actions.[624] Brittney Cooper asks, "Can Black women ever have an unapologetic sexual self in public without being called Jezebel?"

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[620] Ibid., 187.
[621] Ibid.
[622] Nina Cartier, *Cinema Journal*, 155.
[623] Utz McKnight, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 187.
[624] Regis Mann, "'Forever Perverse, Queer, Askew': Notes on Slavery and Resistance in African American Studies," *Journal of American Studies* 49 (2015): 2.

and "How is it that a Black woman who owns and runs the company is called a mammy because of her nurturing moments?"[625] Both questions insinuate that in analysis, positive and neutral attributes embedded within tropes are often rejected because the stereotypes as a whole are damaging. This limits the potentiality and possibility of Africana women's identity characteristics in media and in real life, because the stereotypes make many of the actions and emotions in which Africana women perform problematic endeavors. The stereotypes restrict Black women to express only a few aspects that are either overly simple, can be interpreted as stereotypes, or the antithesis of white womanhood.

The juxtaposition between Beyoncé's Black female music artist performances, the complex "post-racial" Black womanhood of Michelle Obama and Olivia Pope, and the Afrofuturist perspective of identity, sexuality, and gender expression by Janelle Monáe offers a wealth of intersectional analysis.

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BIOGRAPHY

On December 1, 1985 in Kansas City, Kansas, Janelle Monáe Robinson was born to her African American mother and father, who worked as a janitor and a garbage truck driver respectively. Her childhood was not financially stable, and sometimes, when she was old enough, Monáe worked with her mother cleaning offices. When recalling her background, Monáe expresses that she "comes from a very hard working-class family who made nothing into something." [626] Her family's economic position did not limit her

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[625] Ibid.
[626] Dorian Lynskey, "Janelle Monáe: Sister from Another Planet." *The Guardian*. August 20, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/aug/26/janelle-monae-sister-another-planet.

ability to pursue her artistic talents. Monáe showed multiple talents at a young age, and

her parents made sure that she had access to spaces that would develop her skills. During

her childhood and adolescence, she performed in school musical productions such as *The

Wiz*,[627] wrote scripts and musicals, and performed in a singing duo.[628] After high school,

she moved to New York City to study musical theatre at the American Musical and

Dramatic Arts Academy. Monáe eventually dropped out of the school because she felt

confined by what they were offering Black women.[629] She wanted the choice to build and

perform different types of characters, but she quickly saw that the musical industry did

not offer many options for African American artists. She "would go and watch the

Broadway shows" but recognized that African American artists were type casted.[630]

Monáe "didn't want to have to live vicariously through a character that had been played

thousands of times – in a line with everybody wanting to play the same person."[631]

After taking the advice of a family member (and attracted by the musical group

Outkast), she moved to Atlanta to pursue her music career. "She lived in a boarding

house with five other women and worked at the Office Depot" while performing at

college dorms.[632] During her "dorm room lounge tours," she met music artists and

producers Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder. Monáe describes their initial meeting as a

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[627] A musical, that is the retelling of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ* with African American characters and settings based on New York City.

[628] Dorian Lynskey, *The Guardian*; Molly Hagan, "Janelle Monáe." *Current Biography* 74, no. 5 (May 2013): 76-81; Omisore, Adeniyi. "Interviews: Janelle Monáe: Unbound Imagination." *Singersroom*. June 20, 2006. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.singersroom.com/content/2006-06-20/Janelle-Monae-Unbound-Imagination/#ixzz3OMTxVP1C.
Monáe and her best friend, Kinshasa Smith, formed a duo named "ShasJa."

[629] Molly Hagan, *Current Biography*, 78.

[630] Ibid.

[631] Dorian Lynskey, *The Guardian.*

[632] Ibid.

"Matrix moment" (in reference to the 1999 film), "We all locking eyes and it was almost like were meant to be on the same team."[633] Together, in 2000, the three established the Wondaland Arts Society a collective of visual, literary, and performance artists. They "formed a record label of the same name,"[634] and released "The Audition" in 2003 that they self-distributed from Monáe's boarding house.

At an open mic event, Outkast rapper Big Boi (Antwan Andre Patton) was in awe from Monáe's rendition of Robert Flack's "Killing Me Softly." After her performance, he approached Monáe and said "Man! That was inspiring!"[635] Sometime later, Big Boi signed her on his label, Purple Ribbon Records. She was featured in a few songs on the soundtrack to Outkast's 2006 musical *Idlewild*, such as "Call the Law" and "In Your Dreams."[636] With Big Boi's support, Monáe and Wondaland produced the EP album Metropolis: Suite I (the Chase) and released it online on the social networking platform MySpace in 2006. The album attracted the attention of Sean "Puffy" Combs, who then contacted Monáe through her MySpace account. He signed her to his label, Big Boy Records and redistributed the Metropolis: Suite I album. In 2008, her song "Many Moons" was nominated for Best Urban/Alternative Performance at the 51st Grammy Awards. In 2010, she released *The ArchAndroid* and in 2013, *The Electric Lady*; Both albums have received accolades for their unique composition and inclusion of a variety of music genres.

LITERATURE ABOUT JANELLE MONÁE'S TECHNOLOGIES

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[633] Ibid.

[634] Molly Hagan, *Current Biography*, 78.

[635] Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." *Rolling Stone*. June 30, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.

[636] Molly Hagan, *Current Biography*, 78.

Janelle Monáe is a fairly new subject to academic inquiry; however, there have been a few articles published since her debut that analyze her music and clothing style for their symbolic relationships or historical connections. In "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism," African American Literature theorists Daylanne English and Alvin Kim propose that Monáe is a proponent of a neo-Afrofuturism that consists of "a fresh, funky optimism that promises not so much to "remove" as to *move* Africana people, even in the context of contemporary capitalism."[637] Her neo-Afrofuturism is a descendent of, but transcends, the simple conceptualization of Afrofuturism as the intersection between race, technology and the future. Alternatively, English and Kim explain that Monáe approaches Afrofuturism similarly to conceptual artist Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky)'s categorization of it as a "renewal of tools of skepticism."[638] She performs an Afrofuturism that "produces a profound critique of current social, racial, and economic orders and imagines a less constrained Black subjectivity in the future."[639]

English and Kim argue that Monáe does not embrace the utopian assumption of a post-racial, post-colonial future; instead, she personifies the hyperembodiment of an Africana woman and refuses to adopt the transcendental solution given by both contemporary liberal technoculturalists and proto-Afrofuturist Africana musicians such as George Clinton and Parliament/Funkedelic (P-Funk). English and Kim assert that P-Funk's objective with their music was to induce a type of transcendence from the racist

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[637] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no 4 (2013): 229.
[638] Paul. D. Miller. *Book of Ice,* 122.
[639] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies,* 217.

and emasculating dystopia that their Black audiences inhabited. Clinton & P/Funk "used synthesizers and amplifiers to replicate" funk, thereby multiplying and magnifying the polyrhythmic and polyphonic structure of their music - found in other African American musical genres - as a means to stimulate a psychedelic experience that would transport their listeners beyond the oppressions they, as black men, face daily.[640] P-Funk desired their funk to remain 'uncut' - without interference or violation from a "pop" music sound and style- in order to continue as an uncomplicated, "unadulterated blackness and Black joy."[641] The band did not include a progressive female narrative within their transcendental music. They kept the ability to rise above racism to the domain of masculinity, and left Africana women to "lay prone" in their wake.[642]

Similar to most 21st century Africana music artists, Monáe's music develops from P-Funk. English and Kim claim that - unlike P-Funk -she accepts the conditions of her ability to be a commodity and uses it, in a world keen on reproduction, to multiply her identity construction as a method to "exhibit new liberatory possibilities."[643] In her musical performances and political discourses, Monáe produces an excess of signification

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[640] "The polyrhythmic (containing several complementary rhythms within a selection) and polyphonic (combining several simultaneous voice parts) characteristics give African music a distinct musical signature." C.D. Grant, Afro-American Music: One Form of Ethnic Identification., 1985. ERIC Document: ED 268192.

[641] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies*, 220.

[642] "Women, SNCC, and Stokely: An Email Dialog, 2013-14." *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*. 2014. Accessed November 1, 2015. http://www.crmvet.org/disc/women2.htm.

At the 1964 Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) meeting in Waveland, Mississippi, "A call went out inviting all SNCC staff to attend and discuss issues the organization was facing. Ruby Doris Smith presented a paper on 'The Position of Women in SNCC.' At an informal gathering afterward, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) joked 'The only position for women in SNCC is prone.'" He often repeated this quip at other events. Although Ture was known for working with and having intimate relationships with progressive women, this statement was representative of the some of the patriarchal and sexist sentiment coursing throughout the Civil Rights Movement and the Africana community.

[643] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies*, 218.

of her representation. She uses her performance texts to create multiple layers of meaning that "make you feel and think more intensely along a broader band of emotional and intellectual spetra than ever before."[644] "She aims to convey the power of cyberidentity – one that recognizes the paradoxical tension of resisting and embracing ones relationship to the system – as a method to subvert the oppressive powers of the state."[645] In her objectives for inspiring Africana people to "transform" rather than "transcend," English and Kim conclude that Monáe connects to the lineage of sublime Black funk liberation, but she expresses a multilayered, intersectional "hyper"-humanity from the social position of a Black woman.

In their article, English and Kim demonstrate Monáe's unique approach to technological agency. They affirm that Monáe connects to the speculative tradition of Afrofuturism, yet she enhances aspects of its previous iterations. Monáe produces potential strategies to challenge white cultural domination with her adoption of "both/and" approaches to the gender perception of her clothing and the interpretation of her android persona. Moreover, she does not distance her identity from the system she wishes to transgress; instead, she appropriates its technological advancements in order to operate as a "spook sitting by the door."[646]

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[644] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 00[-002].

[645] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies*, 225-26

[646] Elizabeth Reich, "A New Kind of Black Soldier: *Performing Revolution in the Spook who Sat by the Door*. African American Review 45, no. 3 (2012): 325.

"In the film, *The Spook who sat by the Door*," an Black veteran named Dan Freeman gains admittance into the CIA by playing "the spook" (i.e., the subservient black person). Now an official "spook" (a spy), Freeman turns double agent and uses his training from the CIA to launch a paramilitary revolution against the United States government...Freeman trains gang members in a type of guerrilla warfare in which one of the primary weapons is the resignification of black identity."

In "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's 'Cold War,'" Shana Redmond analyzes the 2010 music video of the song "Cold War" to argue that Monáe signifies multiple intersectional relationships of her identity simultaneously. By emphasizing the fluidity of her position as a participant in supposedly contradictory discourses, "she challenges the "dichotomies of black/white, inside/outside, past/present, etc."[647] Monáe solicits others to read her body, and therefore uses it as a text to "protest challenges to black political cultures."[648]

According to Redmond, Monáe uses the medium of a music video as a "platform for display and critique."[649]In the music video, Monáe removes distraction of narrative or set design. She performs the song in front of a black background with the camera close-up upon her face and cropping the rest of body below her neck. Monáe does not wear her 'uniform' - the black and white tuxedo and saddle shoes ensemble she often wears during concerts and interviews; Only her bare shoulders, neck, and natural look make-upped face are visible in front for her audience. By removing most of the usual visual noise, her viewers can focus on reading "the layers of history, identity, and resistance"[650] that emanate from her body and the song lyrics. Her Black woman body is always pregnant with the history of oppression and resistance of Africana people, while her words complicate its meaning. Her words reference both the struggle of being seen as an Africana woman, and the legacy of the Cold War that inputs a nationalist discourse of

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[647] Shana L. Redmond, "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War,"" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no.4 (2011): 394.
[648] Ibid., 406.
[649] Ibid., 399
[650] Ibid.

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marginalization and supremacy upon the actions of everyday citizens.[651] The mixture of the lyrics and her body allows "Monáe to sensitize her audience" to collapse the epistemological distance between the history, identity, and resistance embedded in the visual language of her body."[652] They can read her body as both a text about Africana negotiations with issues of American racism, and the legacy of Africana American women's fight for the right to be free from various forms of patriarchy.

In her case study of the "Cold War" music video, Redmond illustrates a specific example of Monáe's approach to technological agency that English and Kim attempted to explain in their piece. English and Kim posit that Monáe has technological knowledge of how to operate both inside and outside the system in order to represent herself and other Africana women as agents of resistance and liberation. Redmond elucidates upon how Monáe specifically operates from an Afrofuturist position when she applies a science fictional trope to interrogate the present day and future issues of Africana people. According to Redmond, Monáe contorts time and space, and brings the past forward to disrupt uncontested meaning. In other words, she highlights the "everywhere-ness and concrete experience" of the Cold War, and "makes her non-nationalized Black feminine body a landscape for its battles."[653] Redmond claims that Monáe uses the technique of positioning the frame of the viewer to only look upon her face in order to disrupt their automated response to instill her with inhumanity. By limiting viewers to engage just her presence and her words, Monáe creates a space to centralize the dialogue about the

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[651] Ibid., 395.
[652] Ibid., 399.
[653] Ibid., 401.

struggles of interiority and the ongoing battles of visibility fought inside and outside of the Africana woman's soul.

In her work "Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance" Elizabeth Stinson examines the usage of Black feminist performance to uncover the racial and gender archives of punk. White, male-bodied, individuals claiming a "homogenized fuck-your's-articulations, spit-in-your's-face symbolism, and aesthetics of disorder" predominately produce punk.[654] However, the genealogy and archive of punk itself is not founded in white subjectivity. By the nature of its erratic structure, "punk cannot be comprehended by its origin nor its supplements, or by its presence and what is absent."[655] She asserts that a methodology of historicizing punk music should "recognize the Black feminist subtext in punk and analyze the meaning of the punk archive through the complexities of black feminist punk performance."[656] After attending to those two aspects then the punk archive can "address the supplemental force of race in punk while steering the punk archive in a more plural and political direction."[657]

Stinson proposes that the sonic performance of the Black female punk artist transforms and disrupts the incessant standardization of punk as part of a white patriarchal project due to their articulation of a Black female presence through punk vocabulary and aesthetic. She claims they operate as black (w)holes – "embodiments of

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[654] Elizabeth Stinson, "Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance." *Women & Performance - A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2-3 (2012): 299.
[655] Ibid., 277.
[656] Ibid.
[657] Ibid.

both energy and distortion."[658] In the process of identifying their location in punk discourse, one uncovers both what is absent within the archive and what is present. In their perceived absence from the discourse, Black female punk artists complicate the intention of punk and embed the genre with alternative significations of sound, sexuality, gender, and race.[659] In addressing the re-articulation of marginalized identities within the genealogy of punk, Black female punk artist sonic performance becomes a "means of detecting alternative spaces of sexuality and performance" within the genre.

Because of Monáe's Afrofuturist actions to create speculative identities and universes for Africana people, Stinson includes Monáe in her examination of punk archival discourse. She alleges that Monáe "produces a supplement space for archiving black performance," that both connects to and reproduces the past with her music, clothing style, and Cindi Mayweather persona. Monáe unsettles a temporal linearity between her performance of self, and the political, historical, and cultural references she inserts in her music. Because of her multiple articulations of imagined and embellished realities in her lyrics and visual artifacts, she continually inscribes new meanings and types of spatial and temporal connections in these references. For instance, at the end of the song "Many Moons," Monáe performs the "Cybernetic Chantdown." In a trance state, her character Cindi Mayweather lists two-word phrases referencing political, historical, and cultural products such as "Civil Rights, Civil War," "STD, quarantine" "Tomboy, outrage" and "White House, Jim Crow." When Monáe vocalizes these words within her Afrofuturist universe, she disengages them from linear time. In essence, she folds time in

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[658] Ibid., 278.
[659] Ibid., 276.

that moment to address concurrently their presence as historical, contemporary, and futuristic artifacts. Stinson asserts Monáe uses her sonic performance to "mediate a genealogy"[660] that resists origination by existing outside of linear chronological structures; and forms new meanings to the connections between the past, present, and future. Monáe is a representation of a punk archiving that "exists without a known origin and resists patterns of domination, binaries, and neoliberal pop economies of ambivalence."[661] Stinson clarifies that Monáe's technological agency of simultaneously inhabiting multiple connections of historical, political, and cultural meaning is a methodology to reveal the absence of Africana women's intersectional conditions in punk history.

These scholarly engagements with Monáe's performance of identity distinguish various ways that Monáe affects discourse concerning the textual meaning making of both her image and the representation of Africana women. English and Kim posit that she is an Afrofuturist who prefers to embrace the uncomfortable location of existing as a revolutionary against and participant of the capitalist system. They claim that Monáe operates her identity to alter Africana consciousness towards deliberating upon their future condition as it relates to white supremacist machinations. Redmond claims that Monáe's identity performances can be utilized as a type of conceptual perspective for strategizing Africana women's resistance to stereotypes. Monáe's lyrics and visuals provide a collection of alternative actions that Africana women may embrace in order to plan how they will be perceived in a future time. Lastly, Stinson claims that Monáe's

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[660] Ibid., 300.
[661] Ibid., 301.

performance of identity can be a methodological tool to rupture traditional perspectives of history and aesthetics. As the celestial body of a black hole emits and disrupts the interiority of nearby entities, Monáe performs actions that destabilize interrogations that favor white supremacist narratives, and emanates outlooks that do not depend upon a fixed center.

Overall, the literature on Monáe demonstrates how she uses her performance texts to generate spaces for other Africana women to have the freedom to act in favor of their own liberation. I broaden these analyses' interpretation of Monáe in order to argue that she performs a multilayered Africana womanhood for amplifying Africana woman agency. Her intention is to produce not only a different lexicon of Black womanhood, but also a catalyst that motivates Africana women to perform their own revolutionary Black womanhoods. From her performance, Africana women are compelled to "modify and augment their clothing and agential capabilities to indicate their relationship"[662] to white cultural domination and Africana social development. Monáe's identities of an entertainer, a character of a folktale, and a storyteller (in the manner of Sojourner Truth) convey a narrative of an Africana woman who defies oppression in order to free herself and her people from mental subjugation by the system. In conjunction with her identity, she produces performance texts that express a fantastic and powerful narrative featuring liberation and Africana woman self-knowledge. The strength of her narrative and practicality of her identity results in her texts -her clothing style and the character Cindi Mayweather – possessing an imitable quality. Her audience puts on a costume similar to

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[662] Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.

Monáe's black and white suit in order to reproduce her style; in their imitation, Monáe's audience replicates her "sartorial presentation of a critical engagement with racialization, class privileges, gender assignments, capitalism, Africanity, and sexuality."[663] Similar to Sojourner Truth's storytelling ability to influence the morality and thought of her listeners, I assert that Monáe acts as a teller of folktales who influences her viewers with superhero archetypes. She produces a hero who "gives perspective on what circumstances are occurring with her audience. Her hero conveys 'the wisdom of life' to her the audience, and effects their identity development."[664] The method in which she performs her identity enables her audience to imagine alternative Africana futures as well as act upon their imaginations.

MONÁE'S LIBERATION TECHNOLOGIES

Agency for Liberation

Janelle Monáe is on the rise as an icon of Black womanhood in the 21st century. Her 2012 debut as a spokesperson for the cosmetic company CoverGirl has distributed her aesthetic and philosophy to a broader audience, as well as increased her visibility as an entertainer. Her phenotypically Black feminine features appear as an advertising device to demonstrate the diversity of a company that sells beauty products to a predominately-white American marketplace. Regardless, her face does not promote lipstick and foundation alone. Her quirkiness and unwavering declaration of a complex

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[663] Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.
[664] Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up": A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes." In *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*. eds. Sheena C Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 225-226.

Africana identity add to her public appeal. In a commercial for CoverGirl, Monáe declares she is a woman of color, who "didn't have to change who she was."[665]

Despite the growth of her celebrity, she continues to claim publically her Africana origins. She remains an African agent who acts to affect culturally centered change upon Africana society. In interviews, songs, and speeches, Monáe repeatedly identifies herself as an "African American female artist" or a "Black female artist."[666] Furthermore, she combines affirming her identity with stating the intended purpose of her actions. In an interview with Rolling Stone Magazine early in her career, she asserts, "she will help redefine what is possible for Black female performers, 'I'm trying to open doors for girls who look like myself and have been told they can't sing about this or that.'"[667] In response to an interviewer asking how she felt about a classroom of children singing one of her songs on YouTube, Monáe states, "Being a young African American female artist, I want to open doors for young Black girls."[668] In her acceptance speech at the Trumpet Awards, – a ceremony recognizing "Black Americans who have succeeded against immense odds"[669] - Monáe affirms, "I decided through fashion and music that I would challenge the status quo and redefine what it meant to be a Black female artist."[670] In her sentences, she links identity with action because Monáe's strategy is to use her identity

[665] "Janelle Monae: #GirlsCan Stay True to Themselves | COVERGIRL." YouTube. December 1, 2014. Accessed December 1, 2015. https://youtu.be/AwnihjfbAvw.

[666] Rebecca Sinn, "Hey! Ms. Monáe Has Something To Say." *Glamour*, (August 1, 2011), 162.

[667] Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." Rolling Stone. June 30, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.

[668] Rebecca Sinn, "Hey! Ms. Monáe Has Something To Say." *Glamour*, (August 1, 2011), 162.

[669] "About the Trumpet Awards." *The Trumpet Award Website*. 2013. Accessed December 1, 2015. http://trumpetfoundation.org/about.

[670] Elizabeth Montgomery, "Janelle Monáe, Jamie Foxx, Tommy Hilfiger and Others Saluted at Trumpet Awards | Atlanta Buzz with Jennifer Brett." Atlanta Journal-Constitution Online - Atlanta Buzz. January 27, 2015. Accessed December 3, 2015. http://buzz.blog.ajc.com/2015/01/26/janelle-monae-jamie-foxx-tommy-hilfiger-and-others-saluted-at-trumpet-awards/.

performance to subvert "expectations of Africana women expression, and 'trouble' the

cultural logic for viewers"[671] for the benefit of present and future generations. She

professes to behave in a particular manner that disrupts the power of stereotypes and

opens pathways for Africana women to engage in diversifying Africana womanhood. Her

speech, songs, and actions indicate that her interests lay with Africana people and culture,

particularly Africana women. Moreover, her language and attitude recall Africana

cultural and historical references that encourage Africana people, especially subjects and

objects that allude to revolution and liberation.

In the song "Ghetto Woman," Monáe sings the praises of the working class and

poor Africana mother--giving special recognition to her own mother's challenges in the

third stanza. She sings, "Carry on Ghetto Woman, cause even though they laugh and talk

about the clothes you wear, I wish they could just realize that all you've ever needed was

someone to free your mind."[672] Monáe's attitude towards Africana women is one of

respect and love. She does not put Africana women on a pedestal nor romanticize their

experience. Monáe appreciates that her mother and other black women created

homeplace[673] for their children. On the other hand, Monáe does not ignore that racism,

sexism, capitalism and other oppressive factors shape black women's thinking, their

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[671] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 201.

[672] "Ghetto Woman," *The Electric Lady*, 2013.

[673] bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. 41-50. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990; E. Patrick Johnson, "Quare Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." In *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, 124-157. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005; Amanda J. Davis, "Shatterings: Violent Disruptions of Homeplace in Jubilee and The Street." *Melus* 30, no. 4 (2005): 25-51.

Homeplace "[is] the one site where one [can] freely confront the issue of humanization, where one [can] resist." It "is a place where one can find reprieve from an otherwise harsh world." It is the first location where [Africana people] receive 'equipment for living.'" It provides a sense of self amongst a world of negation of self.

sense of self, and their modes of parenting. The lyric "all you've ever needed was someone to free your mind" is repeated twice in the song, with a prominent position at the end of a chorus stanza. The verse shows that Monáe comprehends that liberation is limited if Africana women do not know they can be free. She directs her listener to the complexities of Africana life, as well as offers possible steps for liberatory living.

Monáe generates and remixes tropes and materials to create a sankofic relationship between herself and former music genres, musicians, and significant people. She then presents them in unconventional ways that continue to align with an Africana cultural tradition. In the song, "Many Moons," Monáe describes a war-like situation and the social condition of the people affected. She remarks, "When you growing down instead of growing up, you gotta ooo ah ah like a panther."[674] She illustrates that when people are dying or remaining ignorant of the battle surrounding them, they do not grow. In order to alter their circumstance, they have to make noise like a panther. Her use of the word panther may imply that the marginalized group in her song should act similar to a large feline with black fur - an animal that has historically signified the strength of Africana people. When they act like a panther, the marginalized speak with power. Panther may also allude to the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, a political organization in the 1960s and 70s who responded to the death and harassment of Africana people by speaking out against police brutality, and for Africana human rights. When the marginalized act like the Black Panthers, they speak for their right to survive. In another instance, during her rap in "Q.U.E.E.N.," Monáe associates her characteristics with

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[674] "Many Moons," *The Archandroid,* 2010.

significant historical Africana women. "My crown too heavy like the Queen Nefertiti, Gimme back my pyramid, I'm trying to free Kansas City. Mixing masterminds like your name Bernie Grundman, Well I'mma keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman."[675] In the lyrics, Monáe knowingly mentions Tubman and Nefertiti to invoke their salient characteristics of salvation and leadership in Africana culture and to indicate her cognizance of the Africana social and cultural milieu.[676]

To solve injustices against Africana women, Monáe remains informed of the influence of her presence in society, its effects on those she wishes to empower, and its impact on those who aim to disempower Africana people.[677] She hacks the concept of double consciousness by producing an identity performance that has multiple interpretations. In her songs and clothing style, she presents characteristics that acknowledge the effects of "the structures that have contorted the meaning of Black female bodies"[678] as well as those that "reclaim the multidimensionality of the Black experiences"[679] and develop Africana womanhood. In the "Cybernetic Chantdown," Monáe intermixes two-word phrases of Africana political and cultural references with her own history and mythology. The set, "Outcast, weirdo; stepchild, freakshow; black girl, bad hair, broad nose, cold stare"[680] describes Monáe's beliefs about her personal characteristics and how others react to it. She sees herself as outcast, stepchild, Black girl

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[675] Q.U.E.E.N., *The Electric Lady.* 2013.

[676] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Paradigm,* 239-240.

[677] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 214.

[678] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 200.

[679] hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 5.

[680] "Many Moons," *The Archandroid,* 2010.

with a broad nose, while others give her a cold stare as they see her as a weirdo, freakshow with bad hair. In this verse, she approaches her identity and the identity of Africana culture through a lens of double consciousness. As the techno-beat illuminates the artificiality of identity and categorization (and the fact that the song is sung by the android Cindi Mayweather), she transports her listeners to "the strange space where one sees the origins of one's [imposed and self-chosen] identity, as well as its consequences."[681] Monáe both accepts the meaning of her version of Black girlhood and reveals the destructive nature of others' interpretation.

Monáe's philosophy behind her identity performance "can be read as explicitly political."[682] The intention of her agency is to affect the life-chances and psychological development of Africana women and girls because she desires for Africana women and girls to be able to act freely and without apology to mainstream society. Externally defined myths hinder the range of characteristics Africana women can perform and induce feelings of doubt and inauthenticity when Africana women act outside of its imposed boundaries. Film, television, and internet media disseminates to the masses most of the imagery of externally defined myths of Black womanhood. They manifest and perpetuate "false representations of Africana women as inferior (especially in areas of intellect, emotional stability, technological knowledge and skill, manners, sexuality, and financial matters)."[683] Monáe's overall objective is contrary to the endeavor of white

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[681] Julian Jonker, "Black Secret Technology (The Whitey on the Moon Dub)" *CTheory*, December 4, 2002. Accessed December 8, 2014. http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick =358.

[682] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 200.

[683] Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer, "'We Make Freedom': An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism." Journal of Black Studies 31, no. 4 (2001): 449.

cultural domination. She interjects herself into the public discourse and performs her

identity to "increase the diversity Africana people's representation."[684] She remarks,

"There are lots of young girls out there who are struggling with their identities... afraid of

being discriminated against or teased. I take risks and use my imagination so that other

people will feel free and take risks."[685] Monáe aspires to become an unconventional

standard of acting alternatively Black. She strives to be a "site for imaging the future

possibilities"[686] of Black womanhood - to inspire others to feel comfortable performing

their versions of Africana cultural identities. She brazenly acts as an Africana agent in an

anti-Black woman environment as part of her duty to her ancestors, her elders, and her

community; "Her personal obligation to be socially conscious in her words and music is

'because my grandmother sacrificed for me to be who I am.'"[687] She wants to free Kansas

City, and other Africana communities, because she believes that she has "a responsibility

to the community. The music we create is to help free their minds, and whenever they

feel oppressed, to keep them uplifted."[688]

Monáe uses various linguistic and visual methods to engage her listeners/viewers

in a discursive play of 'fantastic' politics and identity. She uses her clothing and her

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[684] hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 5.

[685] Gillian Andrews, "Janelle Monáe Turns Rhythm and Blues into Science Fiction." Io9. July 21, 2010. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns- rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction.

[686] Michelle P. Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (dissertation, Georgia State University 2012), 220.

[687] Tre'vell Anderson, "BET Experience 2015: Erykah Badu, Janelle Monáe Talk Black Hair, Hip-hop." *Los Angeles Times*. June 28, 2015. Accessed October 10, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-erykah-badu-janelle-monae-bet-experience-20150628-story.html.

[688] Dorian Lynskey, "Janelle Monáe: Sister from Another Planet." The Guardian. August 20, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/aug/26/janelle-monae-sister-another-planet.

lyrics to classify herself as an example of a radical and liberatory Africana womanhood. When she is read by others as a viable alternative to externally defined myths of Africana womanhood, her identity performance becomes a site where "conventional notions of power and self are unsettled."[689] The dialogue between herself and her community "pushes to the surface the mechanisms that uphold the power of white cultural domination," [690] and reveal the tension between the imagination of the marginalized and the desires of the privileged. In Monáe's use of speculation and fantastical imagery, she does not blindly install Africana agency in others. She acts instead as an agent who inspires Africana people to reimagine their possible societal trajectories from their own cultural centers, and develop their ability to act upon their future.

Monáe's Folklore technology

Public performance is an effective tool to develop a critical consciousness in Africana people. Historically, ritualized events have been the cornerstone of transmitting and developing cultural unity amongst the Africana community. "These practices used commonly known symbols and artifacts, in a choreographed performance, in order to foster (or restore) community connection."[691] Performances such as reenacting the death and rebirth of Asar in Ancient Kmt, the enstoolment of the Asantehene in Ghana, and Easter revival in Africana churches in the United States are all rituals that operate as

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[689] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 16-17; Shana L Redmond, "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War."" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 4 (2011): 406.
[690] Ibid.

[691] Kathryn Coe, Craig T. Palmer, and Khadijah elShabazz. "The Resolution of Conflict: Traditional African Ancestors, Kinship, and Rituals of Reconciliation. *African Conflict and Peace Building Review* 3, no. 2 (2013): 118.

"sites whereby the Africana community not merely expresses itself, but more actively, tries to understand, reinforce, and reflexively critique who they are in the world."[692] The continual staging of events and circumstances from Africana culture's history and present renews feelings of connection between Africana people, as well as, stimulate thinking towards the future of the community.

In the United States, Africana people also used performance as a location where they transgressed behavioral and speech limitations put upon them by oppressive forces.[693] In public forums, they expressed 'radical ideas'[694] that would galvanize Africana communities towards fighting for their human and civil rights. "During the 1960s, radical poets, musicians, and political leaders, such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X,"[695] conveyed political and cultural knowledge through artwork, songs, and speeches. In particular, by his use of the verbal, gestural, and sartorial style of the Black preacher tradition, King had the ability to imbue his listeners with a hopeful future orientation despite the continued violence enact upon them. His proficient black preacher performance gave them "reassurance from a hostile world and an uncertain life in the performance."[696] King was "vigorous, dramatic, and instructive in language, theme, and gesture. He would repeat words or phrases, make allusions to spirituals; assume the identity of the biblical character, and employ other recognizable rhetorical devices to an

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[692] E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures." in *Performance Studies Handbook*, eds. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 449.
[693] bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance.* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 212.
[694] Ibid.
[695] Ibid., 218.
[696] William H. Wiggins. "The Black Preacher as Storyteller." In Linda Goss and Marian Barnes, *Talk that Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 209.

Africana cultural audience."[697] The Black preacher tradition was effective in growing and

maintaining Africana Christianity, and it operated as a valuable tool for delivering

messages of freedom, justice, and liberation to Africana audiences.

Artists and activists of the 1960s employed folklore as a rhetorical device to

institute freedom dreams, because Africana people viewed the technique as effective for

rallying the masses. The "folk tellers" of the Civil Rights era told impactful stories

through music, plays, or sermons that conveyed the lived experiences of many Africana

people, as well as signified the solutions and possibilities for fighting against oppression.

These various tales became a common lexicon that gave messages of hope, strength, and

community. Rosa Parks, for instance, became the "Mother of the Modern Civil Rights

Movement" due to her defiance of segregation laws on a Montgomery Alabama bus. Her

actions (and the efforts of many others) were transformed by the community to become

propaganda for the movement. Parks' protest and arrest buttressed by the commencement

and success of the Montgomery Bus boycott spread throughout the Africana community

to symbolize "courage in the face of death."[698] People used the tale of 'the tired old black

lady who defied segregation' to invoke a sentiment of fearlessness in Africana youth. In

both an American and Africana contexts, the myth making of Parks perpetuated the ideal

of the indomitable spirit of the Africana community. Parks knew she was a symbol; she

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[697] Marcellus Blount, "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance." *PMLA* 107 , no.3. (1992): 585.

[698] Yla Eason, "Mrs. Rosa Parks: When She Sat Down the World Stood Up." *Chicago Tribune* (Jun 7, 1973):B6.

remarked, "As time goes by, people have made my place in history bigger and bigger...."[699] Moreover, she recognized that her folklore inspired people to act.

Folklore is the "oral tradition of a people."[700] It is a form of performance pedagogy that contains "seeds of wisdom, problem-solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire. It represents a link between contemporary Africana people and a vast interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions of their ancestors."[701] Folklore is a sankofic practice that pulls information from the past and makes it relevant to the present conditions of Africana people. Asante suggests that folklore is an Africana custom of communicating knowledge and emotion in order to "elevate and sustain Africana people for present and future challenges."[702] Drawing from the wealth of Africana history, a folk teller has the ability to transform their audience. They can use their performance to induce a heightened sense of self-worth and cultural group cohesion; create or renew counter-narratives that serve as a source of resistance to narratives of white supremacy; and serve as an instrument of healing."[703] The ways in which a folk teller performs her story, (similar to the black preacher tradition) generates an emotional response in her audience; the reaction, however, is based upon what message the folk teller is ultimately trying to convey.

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[699] Rosa Parks and James Haskins. *Rosa Parks, My Story.* (New York: Dial Books, 1992) 185.
[700] Leslie Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation," (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009),4.
[701] Tolagbe Ogunleye, "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History. *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997), 436.
[702] Molefi Kete Asante, The Afrocentric Idea. Rev. and Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 113.
[703] Leslie Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation," (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009),4-5.

Folklore has been used as a subversive tool to maintain the intracultural dialogue between Africana people. It was a form of communication where they reminded themselves that they were human and they would obtain freedom from white cultural domination. Folklore was subversive by concealing messages in narratives with fantastical elements, in particular in animal tales. Stories with the characters Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox seem innocuous, because they appear to be a form of escapism. Yet, Br'er Rabbit's outwitting Br'er Fox signifies that while some people may have more physical power, those without power, can survive with their cunning. This theme uplifted enslaved Africana people and gave them hope to resist slaveholders through running away, maroonage, sabotage, strikes, and insurrections. Folktales hide themes or morals that encourage or train Africana people to "create meaningful alternatives to their current conditions."[704]

Monáe "maintains and develops the tradition of Africana folklore and augments it using communication technologies and theoretical frameworks of a post-industrial society."[705] She assumes the identity of her folkloric hero, the android Cindi Mayweather, and performs dynamic songs during visually stunning stage concerts and music videos.[706] In her tale, she includes elements that lean on a speculative perspective of Africana culture that immerses her audience in a hi-tech fantasy filled with Africana faces, and culturally-derived technological marvels. Moreover, she harnesses the novelty of special effects to generate visually stunning stage concerts and music videos. Monáe presents her

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[704] bell hooks, *We real cool: Black men and masculinity.* (Routledge: New York, 2004), 21.
[705] Marc Singer. "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." *African American Review 36,* no. 1 (Spring 2002): 107-119. 109
[706] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no 4 (2013): 212-222.

tale in an entertaining way to make her listeners open to her and accept the message. These techniques prepare her listeners for absorbing other, more subtle and radical messages and themes.

As a folk teller, she is "concerned if her message connects with her intended audience: Africana women. Monáe's desire to influence their liberatory consciousness determines the nature of her performance and the way she distributes her performance texts."[707] As a means to encourage dialogue and inspiration in the contemporary moment, Monáe modifies the traditional methods of Africana folk telling by merging it with modern methods and instruments to better accomplish her overall goals. She attempts to "develop an Africana agent's positive cultural identifications, values, and cosmological knowledge"[708] so they may cultivate their aspirations for the benefit of themselves and their society.

Monáe manufactures, migrates, and adapts concepts and devices from an Afrofuturist perspective in order to distribute sensations of freedom and struggle through film, internet, and other mechanisms whose primary purpose is entertainment. To achieve her objective, she interferes with the one-sided, authoritarian interaction between artist and audience fostered by the passive practice of a viewer watching a music video. Watching television and scanning the internet offer an escape from the trails and monotony of everyday life; television and internet operate to relax the mind and yet consumes one's attention. While many studies claim that television and internet are not

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[707] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 218.
[708] Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up": A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes." In Howard, Sheena C.; Jackson II, Ronald L., Black Comics (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 226.

the sole contributor to influencing one's actions (watching Top chef, will not always make one want to cook), they do have a large effect on how one perceives the world-especially when left unchecked by other socializing institutions such as family, religion, schools, etc. Alternatively, Monáe and her Wondaland compatriots call their music videos *emotion pictures*,[709] because they repurposed the audio-visual format from functioning as a method of anesthetizing consumers to operating as a mechanism that engages the feelings and intelligence of their audience. "They attempt to develop a more comprehensive experience for the viewer/listener, one that connects the mind to the body."[710] In order to direct how her audience engages with her music and visuals, Monáe adapts certain Africana performance techniques for contemporary media forms.

"A key goal of Africana performance is audience participation. It is attained by several techniques, including the use of changes in the teller's voice, repetition of phrases, call-and-response, body motions, music, song, and dance."[711] To simulate the appearance that she and her listeners exist in the same space, Monáe opts to "break the fourth wall."[712] She does not retain the illusion that her performance exists independently from her audience. Monáe recognizes the artifice of the music video and uses it to her

[709] "Q.U.E.E.N.," *The Electric Lady,* 2013.

[710] Redmond, Shana L. "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 4 (2011): 394.

[711] Leslie Edwards, "African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation," (dissertation, Union Institute & University, 2009),71.

[712] The fourth wall is a colloquial term for the phenomena when a character "acknowledges the presence of spectators, and seems to look at them." It is a "counter-look that addresses the collectivity of spectators. Such a look is the sign of a rupture of the fabric of the cinematic fiction or rather - because this rupture is in fact impossible - an attempt at its rupture." Pascal Bonitzer quoted in Tom Brown *Breaking the Fourth Wall*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), x, 23.

advantage. She employs the medium as a " 'liberating technology,' a new and empowering language"[713] to atemporally communicate with her audience.

When she is in front of the camera, she mimics engaging in *call and response*. "The call and response pattern is a tradition in Africana culture where a movement, song, or phrase is followed by a physical or vocal response from the audience."[714] During a sermon in an Africana churches, the pastor's declaration that "God is good," and the churchgoers response of "all the time" is a blatant example of call and response. "Call and response moves the emphasis from the individual to the group. For Africana performance to operate as a unifying device, the performer must receive a response."[715] Monáe faces the camera to give the appearance that she is looking and speaking directly to the viewer, because she anticipates the 'future' presence of her audience and actively wishes to acknowledge them in her videos.

She asks opened ended questions in her songs that beg her audience to engage with certain concepts and opinions, i.e. "Are you bold enough to reach for love?" "Do you know what you're fighting for?" "Will you sleep, or will you preach?" "What the Hell you talking 'bout?" and "Am I a freak? Or just another little weirdo? Call me weak, or better yet – you can call me your hero, baby?"[716]Additionally, Monáe repeatedly uses the second person pronoun 'you.' By utilizing the word 'you,' she directs her conversation towards the listener and effectively pulls them from passively consuming

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[713] Robert Loss, *PopMatters*
[714] Tanisha Ford. "Soul Generation: Radical Fashion, Beauty, and the Transnational Black Liberation Movement, 1954-1980." (dissertation, Indiana University, 2011), 96.
[715] Carl Warner qtd in Tanisha Ford, "Soul Generation: Radical Fashion, Beauty, and the Transnational Black Liberation Movement, 1954-1980," 96.
[716] "Many Moons," "Cold War," and "Faster," *The Archandroid,* 2010; "Electric Lady," and "Hell You Talmbout," *The Electric Lady*, 2013.

her like a commodity; instead, she offers them a chance to interact and engage with her and her message. Monáe declares to her listeners that they have a compelling relationship. Her lyrics allow her to form a connection with them, because she believes they are people who have the ability to "engage in and sustain Africana culture in complex and multiple ways."[717] Moreover, her interrogatory lyrics challenge those "who have forgotten, lost, or ignored their own voice and agency to join her cause."[718]

These performance techniques signal to her audience that she knows they are watching, and that they are the intended receiver of the message of her song. Her performance methods compel her viewers to acknowledge the communal experience of the emotion picture, and in some way, respond, even within their own private domains. Because Monáe's 'calls' are embedded in her performance texts, her identity performance exists in an 'immortal' space, where she can reproduce the same actions for an undetermined time after the initial live performance. She can continually speak every time someone plays her videos. Monáe does not try to exist independently from those who are watching or listening to her. She is "always attempting to engage in a synchronous or asynchronous dialogue with her audience."[719] Monáe constantly behaves with the hope that her actions illicit a response.

Like Sojourner Truth, Monáe relies on the device of a superhuman figure to act as an intermediary of her message. The character Cindi Mayweather stands in as an allegorical character. She represents a revolutionary black womanhood in a story that

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[717] Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 24.

[718] Shana L Redmond, "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War."" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 4 (2011): 406.

[719] Shana L Redmond, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 395.

interrogates the future meaning of concepts such as otherness, oppression, and liberation. Monáe generates scenarios in which to demonstrate possible tactics and strategies that challenge Africana people's views on identity, leadership, and self-discovery.

During Monáe's recording of her first album *The Audition*, she formed the traits and narrative of Mayweather. The first mention of 'Cindi' appears on track five. The song "Cindi" does not contain any overt science fiction markers, or other superficial elements that link it with the rest of the folklore. It is comprised of a monologue that feels like a dialogue between Monáe and herself. It is this technique that connects this song to other parts of the Mayweather folklore. The song reads like a surreal conversation between creator and creation. The song shifts between third and first person with the speaker (as exemplified by her use of the pronoun "I") expressing distress towards her behaviors, and incompatibility with mainstream society. In the second stanza, the speaker switches to a third person voice, and begins to describe a "she" who has talent and fear. The she, we can presume, is the same speaker as in the first stanza. Monáe expresses her anguish of being herself and who she wants to be. This symbolizes her choice to shift between identities or 'occupy the middle.' She could continue to survive by performing different traits and characteristics depending on the audience or she could use her performance "to contradict social constructions of the black female body, articulate her personal lived experienced, and engage in dialogue with her audience's response to her performance."[720] Ultimately, she decides to do both. [721]At the climax of the song, Monáe

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[720] Alexander, Bryant Keith. "Racializing Identity: Performance, Pedagogy, and Regret." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 15-16.
[721] "Cold War," *The ArchAndroid,* 2010.

sings, "so I talked to her heart, and made up her mind, that I gotta accept her for me."[722] It appears that in this last stanza, with her switching from third person to first person pronouns, Monáe chose to link herself with Cindi.

Monáe's identification with her Mayweather character suggests that she is aware of her performances' utility as a tool of agential amplification. Mayweather's exploits feature prominently in Monáe's music videos and albums, to the point where one has to question if Monáe sings as a folk teller of these stories or if she takes on the persona of Mayweather. In an interview, Monáe asserts that she did not know that she would immerse herself into the character. "Becoming [Mayweather]…I don't know how it happens, it just happens."[723] Monáe correlating herself with her creation exemplifies a process of Africana performance whereby

> *Within a single performance, a performer may be at one point 'acting'*
> *and at another point 'presenting the self.' The performer in the process of*
> *their performance suspends the ordinary, and therefore she creates a*
> *moment of heightened reality in which it is recognized that ordinary*
> *people can become extraordinary for a period of time.*[724]

 For the duration of her performances, Monáe blurs the line between folklore and reality. She compels her audience to "accept her ability to move between the presentation of her self and the presentation of an 'other'"[725] as a practice of empowerment. Monáe creates

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[722] Rajul Punjabi, "Monáe, Mayweather and the Curious Case of the Female Alter Ego." *The Huffington Post*. September 13, 2013. Accessed October 13, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rajul-punjabi/monae-mayweather_b_3914386.html.

[723] "Janelle Monae Teases New Project 'Eephus'" *Fuse*. June 16, 2014. Accessed December 5, 2015. http://www.fuse.tv/videos/2014/06/janelle-monae-bonnaroo-interview#sthash.GhwG6Pmx.0s7LiHaJ.dpuf.

[724] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* Kindle Edition.

[725] Ibid.

these extraordinary moments to inspire her audiences to participate in exhibiting their agential abilities.

The Tale of Mayweather

Monáe begins to reference the folklore of Cindi Mayweather in *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, and gives specific details to the structure of the society and the challenges of her characters. Itinerant information pops up on various social media sites such as Wondaland.com and the-monae.tumblr.com. In subsequent albums such as *The ArchAndroid* and *The Electric Lady,* Monáe focuses on maintaining the atmosphere she established and provides little additional information. Some songs in these albums are mostly instrumentals with a few lines of plot-forwarding dialogue, e.g. Suite II, III, and IV. She concentrates on increasing the emotionality of the folklore to reinforce its impact on listeners. In these albums, the folklore has more of a timeless quality and universal appeal.

From a multitude of sources, we can surmise that Mayweather is an android, a human-shaped machine, who lives in the futuristic city of Metropolis. In Monáe's universe, androids have a cybernetic soul. Consequently, they can feel emotions and act upon them; however, their ability to act upon their human qualities is controlled by the state. Androids may work for humans, but they are not allowed to fall in love. Although they practice small acts of rebellion such as fraternizing with humans in underground clubs, they do not revolt against the system. They live in fear of The Droid Control, a state-sponsored institution that enforces regulations on the rights and privileges of cybernetic beings. Through different songs and other media, Monáe produces a story

about a marginalized woman who journeys from being a servant, to an entertainer, to a fugitive, to the savior of the oppressed.

By developing an epic narrative that immortalizes the experiences and emotions of present and past Africana people, Monáe demonstrates a form of "pedagogical resistance to the externally defined myths perpetuated by white cultural supremacy. In her performance texts, the various songs, music videos, social media, liner notes, etc., she embeds knowledge that educates Africana people for critical consciousness."[726]

Monáe's folklore demonstrates her long admiration for science fiction films and television shows. As a child, Monáe and her family occasionally lived with her grandmother. At times, her grandmother would take care of Monáe and together, they would watch televisions shows and films such as the Twilight Zone, Star Trek, and Star Wars.[727] From these quintessential science fiction legends, she garnered foundational materials to develop her own science fictional concepts.

For the elements of the futuristic city of Metropolis, Monáe drew inspiration from the 1927 German expressionist film *Metropolis*. The film is set in a futuristic world where the upper class intelligentsia and the lower class workers are segregated. The upper class lives a halcyon existence in skyscrapers with bucolic landscapes and extravagant nightclubs, while the working class lives and works in the bowels of the city. In the film, the son of the architect of Metropolis is inspired by a female labor leader to experience a

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[726] bell hooks, *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance,* 218.

[727] Rajul Punjabi, "Monáe, Mayweather and the Curious Case of the Female Alter Ego." The Huffington Post. September 13, 2013. Accessed October 13, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rajul-punjabi/monae-mayweather_b_3914386.html; Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." *Rolling Stone*. June 30, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.

day in the life of the lower class. In his brief journey, he discovers that the workers, whose labor maintains the city, are oppressed. They perform manual labor for most of the day, live underground, and work in dangerous conditions. In the end, he saves the city from the maleficence of the evil scientist, and unites the workers and the upper class. Because of his compassion and his class status, he comes to embody the axiom of the labor leader, "The mediator between head and hands must be the heart."

A subplot of *Metropolis* revolves around a scientist who was in love with the architect's wife. After she died in childbirth, he swore he would seek his revenge by destroying what the architect loved the most -the city. To accomplish his plan, the scientist creates a *machinemencsh* (machine-human) who resembles the labor leader. Without her own thoughts or sense of self-preservation, the *machinemencsh* blindly carries out the plans of the scientist. She preaches to the working class that they should rise up and destroy the city and then, she entertains the upper class to facilitate their going into a frenzy to prevent them from noticing their city is falling apart. When both sides realize they have been tricked, they burn the *machinemencsh* at the stake.

After watching the film, Monáe felt that the film's atmosphere reflected her upbringing. She remarks, "[The working class and upper class] reminded me a lot of some of the Kansas City people and the environment I grew up in... People underground are trying to come up and other people, situations, and things are holding [them] back for whatever reason."[728] From observing these similarities, Monáe uses *Metropolis* as the

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[728] Adeniyi Omisore, "Interviews: Janelle Monáe: Unbound Imagination." Singersroom. June 20, 2006. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.singersroom.com/content/2006-06-20/Janelle-Monae-Unbound-Imagination/#ixzz3OMTxVP1C.

basis for her own folklore. In her narrative, however, she "flips the script" and appoints a

new archetype to save the city. She combines specific traits of the architect's son, the

machinemencsh, and the labor leader to form her dynamic protagonist who is the savior

of the city, a constructed being, and a (Black) woman who lectures to the masses about

the power of love. Cindi Mayweather becomes a multidimensional character in Monáe's

universe of extreme privilege and oppression. She "is the mediator, between the mind and

the hand. She's the mediator between the haves and the have-nots, the oppressed and the

oppressor."[729]

According to Monáe, Cindi Mayweather is an organic android made from

transition metal platinum "who is optimized for rock performance, often cloned, but

never equaled."[730] Her genetic materials derive from an in-universe version of Janelle

Monáe, resulting in alterMonáe being a genetic ancestor to Mayweather.[731] She has other

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[729] Gillian Andrews, "Janelle Monáe Turns Rhythm and Blues into Science Fiction." *Io9*. July 21, 2010. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns- rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction.

[730] Gillian Andrews, "Janelle Monáe Turns Rhythm and Blues into Science Fiction." *Io9*. July 21, 2010. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns- rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction.

[731] Liner Notes, ArchAndroid, 2010; "Janelle Monáe" *Wondaland*. www.wondaland.com. Accessed December 1, 2013.
    In her construction of Cindi Mayweather, Monáe has simultaneously designed an alter Janelle Monáe whose story aligns with the epic of the ArchAndroid. This additional persona is a revolutionary in the present day who is wanted by the Time Council because she "brought the message of the ArchAndroid to the 21st Century" thereby reclaiming a brighter future for humanity. Monáe has documented alterMonáe's history through various media such as music videos, websites, and liner notes. In the linear notes to the ArchAndroid(2010), a Max Stelling, director of the Palace of the Dogs Art Asylum, "a state-of-the-art federal facility for mutants, lost geniuses and savants," documents that alterMonáe is Patient no. 57821, who was stolen from the future and whose DNA was sold on a body farm (and eventual was used to create the Android 57821, Cindi Mayweather). The music video Tightrope (2010) shows alterMonáe as a patient in the Asylum, who inspires other residents to dance and sing, which results in her being able to walk through walls despite that the Asylum has forbidden dancing because of "its subversive effects on its residents and its tendency to lead to illegal magical practices." In the music video to Q.U.E.E.N., alterMonáe was frozen in the Living Museum (run by the Ministry of the Droids), and fellow revolutionaries broke her out with 'sonic patterns' embedded in the Electric Lady vinyl. Lastly, on the Wondaland society website, it states alterMonáe was "Added to the Immortals Wanted List three years ago.

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names throughout her history: The Alpha Platinum 9000, Android Number 57821, the ArchAndroid, and the Electric Lady. These nominal designations assist listeners in identifying what part of the folklore's timeline is being referenced. For instance in "March of the Wolfmasters," (the intro to *Metropolis*), and the song "57821," on *The ArchAndroid*, Mayweather is identified by her classification via the Droid Control. In "March," the announcer broadcasts, "Android Number 57821, otherwise known as Cindi Mayweather, has fallen desperately in love with a human named Anthony Greendown." In "57821" on *The ArchAndroid*, Monáe sings "Cold in the cell, lost and shivering…On the fifth floor, past the blue door, sat a chained 57821." The label is akin to a "slave name" for Cindi Mayweather. It "reflects her subordinate state, and renders her as a chattel detached from her genealogical identity."[732]

Monáe – through Mayweather – sides with the androids, as demonstrated by her use of the pronoun 'we' when identifying androids' characteristics. In interviews, she affiliates herself with androids when she claims that she "only dates androids" and that she "attends an Android community church in Metropolis."[733] Monáe embraces the two-sided complex identity of an entity that possesses subjectivity, and yet is a creation of humans. She sings her complicated condition in the song "Violet Stars, Happy Hunting." Monáe takes on the persona of Mayweather, who has the wherewithal to describe herself as "a cyber girl without a face a heart or a mind." In the next stanza, she engages in a

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But the Time Council was unable to broker the deal with President Obama needed to legally extradite the suspect back to 2719 or terminate the suspect in her local time frame."

[732] Edward Onaci. "Revolutionary Identities: New Afrikans and Name Choices in the Black Power Movement." *Souls* 17, no. 1 (2015): 70-71.

[733] Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." *Rolling Stone*. June 30, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.

brief word play where she claims her ability to reason, as exampled in the lyrics "I think to myself." In response, her digitally duplicated voice illustrates that other's definitions of cyborgs have affected her self-image. It chants in the background "Impossible, it's impossible for me." She both inhabits a space where she has an awareness of self, while acknowledging herself as an 'other.' Her identity displacement is illustrated by the digital background voice repeating, "I'm a product of metal, I'm a product of the man." She simultaneously demonstrates, using the first person pronoun, that she is conscious of her existence. On the other hand, by stating, "She's a product of the man," Mayweather claims that she is a constructed being. Monáe exhibits a similar recognition of her double consciousness. As a Black woman, she is an amalgamation of her personal experience and historic stuff, but she recognizes that her identity is a product of white cultural domination. Eshun describes Monáe's process of becoming or relating to Mayweather's reality as *cyborging*. She adopts the android persona to label herself "as a piece of technical equipment."[734] The cyborg (or android) "offers Monáe a departure from strict binaries and solid identities."[735] Instead, she can embody the 'middle' of being both human and machine. In the contemporary commodity culture, Monáe is attentive to the malleability of being subjected and fetishized[736] and the strength of her unique performance of Black womanhood. She embraces the complexity of existing in an

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[734] Kodwo. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction.* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 106.

[735] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies,* 223.

[736] Ibid.

intersectional position and uses it in her visual and audial productions to initiate dialogue about "the story we still have to tell about black life."[737]

In the city of Metropolis, Mayweather is unique compared to other androids because she "includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul. She is often cloned but never equaled."[738] Mayweather is "a mechanical device constructed" to serve as entertainment for humans.[739] Because her exceptionality and distinctiveness charmed humans, she was freed four years after her creation. "The Digital Auction Code on her wrist now denotes that she is FREE and NOT FOR SALE. She has become a Q.U.E.E.N., an E1 Class android superstar, with full manumission papers."[740] Mayweather's enslavement and subsequently freedom due to her musical aptitude mirrors many experiences of other enslaved musicians in Africana history. The slaveholders paraded blind pianist Thomas Wiggins, and conjoined twins and singers Millie and Christine McKoy were paraded around North America. They enjoyed many benefits from possessing extraordinary talents and being perceived as exceptional compared to other enslaved Africans. Yet, the benefits of being entertainers did not protect them from racism and sexism. The McKoy sisters were subject to gross medical examinations, with doctors who drew pictures of them nude, and made scientific inquiries about their pelvic area. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Wiggins, who was autistic, was a claim in legal battles. He was whisked from former slaveholder to 'guardian,' despite his

[737] Anthony Reed, "African Space Programs: Spaces and Times of the Black Fantastic." *Souls* 16, no. 3(2014): 369.
[738] CD Liner Art. *Metropolis, Suite I: The Chase*, 2007.
[739] Robert Loss, *PopMatters*
[740] "The Electric Lady." *57281*. 2013. Accessed December 5, 2015. http://57821.tumblr.com/post/58176834351/concerning-cindi-and-the-glow-of-the-drogons.

performances making from "$18,000 to $100,000 annually" ($400,000 to $2 million 2015 estimate).[741] Although Mayweather was deemed legally free, she is still oppressed by a society that limits the mobility and opportunities of androids.

After acquiring her freedom, she falls in love with human robo-zillionaire Anthony Greendown. Their pairing is against the law because "androids are not allowed to love humans."[742] This rule is a callback to laws against miscegenation in the early days of Africana enslavement and that continued in the United States until the Supreme Court's positive ruling on the Loving v. Virginia case in 1967. The public perception in Metropolis is that androids do not understand the emotion of love, "[it] is too deep, too wide to feel."[743] Although androids may show or express their feelings, 'human' cultural domination precludes the marginalized from acting upon human emotions. Similar to the experiences of Africana people, the privileged class further denies androids' humanity by perceiving them as being incapable of human characteristics such as love, kindness, and intelligence. "Whites (and others who claim their humanity over others) construct new identities and characteristics for enslaved populations. This reclassification violently stripped marginalized groups of being perceived with human qualities and marked them as inherently different from whites/humans. Their dehumanization ensured a controllable, productive, and disunified workforce for the technological development of the privileged class."[744]

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[741] Gary Robertson. "Thomas 'Blind Tom' Wiggins" *Richmond Times – Dispatch: City Edition.* (February 9, 2004): E1.

[742] CD Liner Art. *Metropolis, Suite I: The Chase*, 2007.

[743] "Metropolis" *The Audition,* 2003.

[744] Barbara Bush, "'Sable Venus', 'She Devil' or 'Drudge'? British Slavery and the 'Fabulous Fiction' of Black Women's Identities, c. 1650–1838," *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000): 767.

Using the plot of *Metropolis* and the characteristics of people she knows from Kansas City (and other Africana environments with which she is familiar), Monáe constructs a tale that weaves together science fiction, the journey of self-knowledge, and love into a political message about oppression and liberation. Her folklore is set in the post-apocalyptic city of Metropolis in the year 2719, "a decadent wonderland known for its partying robo-zillionaires, riotous ethnic, race, and class conflicts, and petty holocausts."[745] Besides androids, there are technological advancements such as holograms, food given in pill form, and clones. Metropolis has 10 zillion and six inhabitants, and the areas are separated into sectors.[746] The love interest of Mayweather, Sir Anthony Greendown, lives in Sector 9. The segregation of citizens is determined by social class: those who live in the "wired" or android areas (the enslaved), and those who live in human (the slaveholders) areas.

In science fiction, androids are similar to cyborgs. They are anthropomorphic machines, constructed by humans using advanced technologies. The difference between the two is that an android is completely synthetic and a cyborg has organic parts. Monáe may be conflating cyborgs with androids in her universe. In her body of work, there are many instances where she refers to androids as "cyborg" or uses the prefix "cyber"[747] to denote an android. For instance, Mayweather would be a cyborg according to the strict definition in science fiction because she is the "gene child" of the human Janelle Monáe - an indication that she contains some biological parts.

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[745] CD Liner Art, *Metropolis, Suite I: The Chase*, 2007.
[746] "Metropolis" *The Audition*, 2003; "Many Moons," *Metropolis, Suite 1: The Chase*, 2007.
[747] The lyrics "where a cyborg can love and a cyber girl is still a queen;" "I'm a cyber girl with a face" "Good Morning Cy-boys and Cyber Girls" from "Metropolis," "Violet stars, Happy Hunting," and the intro "March of the WolfMasters" are representative of this.

In Metropolis, androids are enslaved and sold at auctions to work for the wealthy. In the song, "Metropolis," Monáe states, "it's a common thought that wired folk can be sold and bought…that we're bionic strumpets only worth a dime." The "Many Moons" music video depicts an android auction where "Mayweather performs her blend of neo-soul-funk-punk while her sister androids parade down a fashionista runway as they are being sold to the highest bidder."[748] Androids are vital instruments to the operation of the city of technology and exist to serve the ruling class. Because they rely on the labor of androids to retain their own power, the technologists, police, leaders of underground economies, and other privileged groups oppress the android populace. They are sentient beings; however, the fiction that androids are unable to think and feel runs rampant in Metropolis. Because of this externally defined myth, androids are dehumanized, discriminated, and abused. They are unjustly treated within their society because the privileged class created myths, rules, and regulations to keep them inferior.

The androids rebelled against the suppression of their emotions by appropriating love for themselves. They created spaces, such as the club Mushroom and Roses, "Where all the lonely droids and lovers have their wildest dreams, the golden door of our emotions opens here."[749] In these underground homeplaces, they resisted their oppression by "affirming their humanity by learning to love without fear."[750] Throughout the city of Metropolis, "love became a 'subversive gift' and loving an explicitly 'political act.'"[751]

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[748] Robert Loss, *PopMatters*
[749] "Mushroom and Roses," *ArchAndroid*, 2010.
[750] hooks, bell. "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 46.
[751] Anthony Reed, "African Space Programs: Spaces and Times of the Black Fantastic." *Souls* 16, no. 3(2014): 367.

Androids reclaiming their ability to love themselves and their community were the foundation of their revolution.[752] When Mayweather escaped custody, she became a freedom fighter for love. "Moving through the shadows and the airwaves, her subversive music on the verge of inciting a revolution."[753] Mayweather became a leader of the android resistance. As an android who dared to love, she became the symbol for the revolution. In response to the injustice of androids being enslaved and barred from the human practice of love, Mayweather chooses to survive and operate as a "mediator" to liberate all of Metropolis. She invokes the spirit of Fannie Lou who said, "Nobody's free until everybody's free."

Women's Studies scholar Marlo David, "believes Monáe uses the cyborg to confront the duality [of being both an African and 'a racial Other'] imposed on Africana people by enslavement."[754] She compounds the Du Boisian issue of double consciousness by showing the duality of seeing oneself as oneself and as an 'other' and that the components of one's cultural identity are both self-generated and externally designed. Africana women know the experience of simultaneously feeling like themselves and a mammy. Monáe extends the cyborg metaphor to other marginalized groups. She uses the term android to "speak about the future form of the 'other.' Androids are the new black,

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[752] Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." In *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2nd Edition. Edited by Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart,(Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001),31; Elizabeth Reich, "A New Kind of Black Soldier: *Performing Revolution in the Spook who Sat by the Door*. African American Review 45, no. 3 (2012): 334.

[753] Robert Loss, *PopMatters.*

[754] Marlo David qtd in John Calvert, "Janelle Monáe: A New Pioneer Of Afrofuturism" *The Quietus.* September 2010. Accessed September 1, 2015. http://thequietus.com/articles/04889-janelle-mon-e-the-archandroid-afrofuturism.

the new gay, or the new women."[755] Her folklore hinges upon the science fiction motif of androids and other 'human-like machines' to "draw attention to the social locations of Black bodies," and emphasize how humans use prejudice, discrimination and hatred to dehumanize those categorized as 'other.'[756] Specifically, she employs the metaphor of the cyborg to emphasize Africana people's duality under white cultural domination of being both humans and mechanized/created beings. They must endure being perceived by the privileged class as externally defined myths, and thus they cannot freely navigate society as their intracultural definition of human.[757] The similarity between Africana people and the androids of Monáe's universe is not by chance.

The Power of the Speculative

To disrupt her audiences' reliance upon the existing state of inequality to inform their opinions, Monáe sets her story in a science fictional universe. The presence of androids and the techno-laden futuristic city of Metropolis make Monáe's folklore easily digestible to a 21st century audience. "We live in an era in which the presence of a cyborg is no longer a shocking transgression, but rather a lived reality of contemporary due to cellphones and other mobile and wireless devices augmenting human communication and knowledge."[758]

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[755] Rajul Punjabi, "Monáe, Mayweather and the Curious Case of the Female Alter Ego." *The Huffington Post*. September 13, 2013. Accessed October 13, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rajul-punjabi/monae-mayweather_b_3914386.html.

[756] Isaiah Lavender III, "Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's "Mumbo Jumbo," Colson Whitehead's "The Intuitionist," and Samuel Delany's "Babel-17." *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2, (July, 2007): 188; Anthony Reed, "African Space Programs: Spaces and Times of the Black Fantastic." *Souls* 16, no. 3(2014): 354.

[757] Shaviro, Steven. "Supa Dupa Fly: Black Women as Cyborgs in Hiphop Videos." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (2005):171.

[758] Ron Eglash and Julian Bleecker, "The Race For Cyberspace: Information Technology in the Black Diaspora," *Science as Culture* 10, no. 3, (2001): 371.

Through her science fiction imagery, Monáe presents a society that has achieved great technological progress in their invention of artificial intelligence and humanoid machines. Her world illustrates that human progress was limited to only the development of material goods, while human social development was hindered. Oppression survives despite technological process. In this case, her speculation explores the fate of the marginalized when progress is defined by economics rather than indicators of human and civil rights. In this imaginary world, she provides space "within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken."[759] Her suggestions about the dangers to marginalized people influences others to speculate on solutions to contemporary issues and the types of technologies Africana people will need to solve such issues.

Using science fiction tropes to speculate upon Africana history and futures is a significant tool of Afrofuturism discourse. In the history of Africana music, artists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton employed outer space as a signifier in both the tone of their music and their lyrics as a means to invoke a sense of confusion in Africana audiences about what definition of blackness they subscribe to: their own, or the one imposed upon them? These musicians "tend to eschew the binary distinctions" between humanity and blackness.[760] Instead, they offered a 'new' blackness that is segregated from the debasement of the white imperialist past and rendered blackness an alien, or unfamiliar, concept. Using an Afrofuturist framework, they divorced blackness from a

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[759] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 298.

[760] Ruth Mayer, "Africa as Alien Future: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Post-colonial Waterworlds," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 564.

problematic racist past, and connected it with realities and spaces outside of white control, such as outer space. Sun Ra's imagery of a flying saucer taking Africans into space, can be read as a metaphor about Africana people reconnecting to their spirituality and history. By re-establishing with their heritage, they may transcend racial inferiority and become liberated. On the other hand, he links space technologies with Africana people to challenge the dominance of a white construction of science as an empirical project. Sun Ra posits that science is a mystical process concerned with creating power and new social myths. He combined these two frameworks in his philosophy of Astro Black mythology. Sun Ra asserted that the spiritual could not be understood without the material because 'space' and 'place' are linked. He posits, "if Africana people are going to imagine their futures (be it in space or on earth), they have to image [the material place] where they have come from."[761] Their blackness, therefore, has to be extraterrestrial; otherwise, Africana people will be buried in the past of their imposed inhumanity.

Monáe has a similar approach as Sun Ra when constructing her Mayweather folklore. She aims to

> *interlink historiographic and mythical rhetoric and imagery in order to dismantle [the assumed dominance of certain] value systems and ideologies and give scope to an altogether different, highly fantastic scenario which is as much of the future as it is of the past.[762]*

Monáe delivers cogent science fiction metaphors of the Africana condition, comparing the limitations and discriminatory practices upon androids to the oppression

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[761] Tricia Rose qtd in Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1994), 215.

[762] Ruth Mayer, "Africa as Alien Future: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Post-colonial Waterworlds," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 566.

and white cultural domination of Africana people. After constructing a fantastical world with small aspects that resemble the contemporary era, Monáe inserts allegories of the problems and conditions of African people. Her objective is to delink African agency from time, and create space for the cultural past and the future to be accessible to each African agent.

Mayweather's tale operates as a subversive culture text, "it declares the existence of subjugated knowledge and encodes cultural traditions in a compelling format for future generations."[763] Due to sexism and racism, the experiences of Africana women political activists in Africana social movements have been minimized in the retelling of Africana history. The cultural memory of Africana women heroes and heroics are not sustained as a usable resource for gaining knowledge and/or inspiration.[764] Monáe's creation of an epic story surrounding the deeds of her cybernetic 'woman of the people' operates as an Afrofuturistic production.

In her science fictional universe, Monáe centers her tale around the choices and actions of her protagonist, Mayweather: an android with the physical features of a Black woman, who is discriminated against because of her identity and oppressed because she was constructed by her oppressors. The story revolves around her emotional and intellectual journey from being unaware of her predicament, to becoming an agent for her people's liberation. It mirrors a common and almost mythic tradition of both leaders and

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[763] hooks, bell. "Facing Difference: The Black Female Body." In *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics.* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 94.

[764] Christel N. Temple. "Malcolm X and Black Cultural Mythology" *International Journal of Africana Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 213-223.

the foot soldiers of Africana struggles of human dignity -especially of Africana women activists.

Monáe demonstrates that her characters' transformation is a significant theme in an Africana cultural context. With Mayweather, she "offers a relatable character who embodies the collective hopes, aspirations, and values"[765] of a 21st century Africana people. Monáe makes Mayweather approach extraordinary circumstances with realistic emotions such as fear, apprehension, love, and adulation. Although set in a fantastical situation, the choices she makes to love a human, and channel that love into helping her people, brings to mind the historical choices of people such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Ericka Huggins, whose love of the people was influential to their activism. The Black Panther Party was adamant that their politics stemmed from "a deep love and commitment" to Africana people.[766]

When an Africana person observes Monáe's identity performance, they find the events and emotions she portrays are relevant to their own present-day and historical experiences. The folklore of Mayweather is an amalgamation of previous struggles of Africana people- from fighting against enslavement to present day resistance against racial inequalities. Mayweather's narrative links futuristic ideas with Africana historical signifiers, such as the Black Liberation Movement, to influence Africana women to transgress oppressive narratives that denigrate their potentiality. Monáe generates these stories of Africana possibility with the intent for Africana people to decipher her meaning

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[765] Tolagbe Ogunleye, "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History. *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997), 436 & 447.

[766] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 167.

and act similarly to her protagonist. Monáe remixes various traits and events and sets them in an unfamiliar environment to encourage the dissemination of morals, techniques, and achievements of Africana cultural, and "offer Africana women another dimension of power."[767] In a science fictional landscape, Monáe guides her audiences' attention towards "the political and emotional struggle of Africana women about their images and roles in society."[768]

The folklore of Mayweather allows Monáe to disseminate Africana woman heroism as a site of resistance and empowerment for Africana women. Monáe employs the *Black hero dynamic,* "the stimulation and preservation of cultural heroes and heroics through collective memory"[769] - to enhance Mayweather's impact on Africana audiences. The character's audacity to love, resist dehumanization, and struggle for personal and cultural liberation stem from previous female figures of Africana struggles. Through her journey and through the retelling of her story within the context of the folklore and by the folk teller, Monáe's performance text of Mayweather operates as an epic narrative in the tradition of Africana myth. It possesses the literary magnitude, and the actions of her protagonist serve the best interest of her community. In the African myth structure, Cindi Mayweather exemplifies the characteristics of the Africana hero who struggles for the liberation of Africana people, androids, and the marginalized.[770] "She behaves in a manner that is independent of and external to the expectation of the establishment."

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[767] Nsenga K. Burton "Female Hip-Hop Artists in Outer Space." *Femspec* 4, no. 2 (June 2003): 296.

[768] Ibid.

[769] Christel N. Temple. "Malcolm X and Black Cultural Mythology" *International Journal of Africana Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 213-223.

[770] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." American Studies 52, no 4 (2013): 225.

[771]She is an icon of strength, rebellion, and the states' fears. Mayweather is a (formerly enslaved) Black woman artist, who fights for love (of individuals and community) with words, sounds, and complexity. Mayweather accepts that she is capable of love and affirms that all androids/marginalized people possess the ability to love if they so choose. She becomes a symbol for the people, as evidenced by DJ Crash Crash referring to her as "our favorite fugitive, Cindi Mayweather, Electric Lady number one."[772]

Africana women often do not have many "'larger than life' stories and images in which to emulate."[773] Their mythic heroes either are from history or are horrible misrepresented in popular media such as the character Storm in the X-Men film franchise. "Mayweather exemplifies a Black womanhood that is nearly impossible to find in mainstream culture."[774] Africana science fiction writer N.K. Jemisin remarks, "When I watch her videos and listen to her lyrics I'm shocked to see so much of myself in this ultra-technological future - despite my own writings, despite my own knowledge that black history and myth abounds with techies and innovators, despite my life and my long-held desire to see this very thing."[775] The imagination of Africana people is constantly subject to oppression in the contemporary era. They may have constitutional freedoms; however, promoters of white cultural domination restrict Africana people's

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[771] Tolagbe Ogunleye, "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History. *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997), 447.

[772] "Our Favorite Fugitive," *The Electric Lady,* 2013.

[773] Kenneth Ghee, *Black Comics*, 234.

[774] McDonald, Soraya Nadia. "It's Janella Monae's World. We're Just living In It." *Washington Post.* October 19, 2013. Accessed January 28, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/10/19/its-janelle-monaes-world-were-just-living-in-it/

[775] N.K. Jemisin. "How long 'till Black Future Month? The Toxins of Speculative Fiction, and the Antidote that is Janelle Monáe" In Adventure Rocketship! : Let's Go to the Science Fiction Disco, 2013. Kindle Edition.

imagination. "Every film and television show, though created for reasons of art, entertainment and/or profit, represents the values, mythos, ideologies, and assumptions of the culture that produced it... these narratives shape the conscious of a people."[776] Fictional, historical, or contemporary heroes (as presented in media) have a profound effect on the social development of a people. "They help guide implicit assumptions and beliefs about what it means to be male or female, Black or White, and what it means to be a good or moral citizen in a community and culture."[777] Various media outlets may endorse white cultural domination and Black inferiority. Africana women are prone to accept the embedded concepts as truth. There are few, in any, revolutionary alternatives to these externally defined myths. They fall prey to other' ideals and propaganda (white heterosexual males who fight for 'truth justice and the American way') and their reality is limited to their Eurocentric miseducation. The adoption of non-Africana cultural artifacts results in mental subjugation, i.e. "You're free but in your mind, your freedom's in a bind."[778]

Monáe's depicting of Mayweather as an Africana woman is another tactic she employs to empower her Africana women audience. She designs Mayweather "with similar racial and gender characteristics as her audience" to influence how her audience relates to the character. A hero is 'linked to a particular society or culture' and so their actions would contribute to the protection or salvation of those specific people. For an Africana person to relate to or emulate a role model or hero, the actions or beliefs the

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[776] Robert Cotter qtd in Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up": A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes." In *Black Comics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 229.
[777] Kenneth Ghee, *Black Comics*, 226.
[778] "Many Moons." *Metropolis*. 2007.

hero performs "must be relevant to something happening in the person's life. Without relevance, there is no reference point for grounding the message, or connecting the story, or stimulus, to personal experience for psychological identification and personal growth."[779] [People] act from the images they carry in their minds; and they are more likely to respond to the ideas they have of themselves in a situation.[780]

Monáe made a significant choice when she decided to have an Africana woman act as the protagonist of her folklore. Mayweather's presence emphasizes that freedom is both raced and gendered.[781] Mayweather approaches the challenges of being an enemy of the state, and a leader of the revolution, and an icon of Africana futures from the standpoint of an Africana woman. She does not express a desire to define herself by others' standards of humanity, nor does she imitate traditional, "anti-android" ideas of 'android' womanhood. Mayweather does not function as an escape from racial and gender identity, nor does she act as a tool for upholding white supremacist institutions. Mayweather's actions are for the salvation of her people.

"Black society must produce a greater variety of heroic values. Or, perhaps better, Black society must value the heroic struggles of Black members in greater variety of constructive endeavors..."[782] Monáe participates in the sankofic practice of sustaining a Black hero dynamic. She uses music videos, social media, and albums to encourage the proliferation of cultural memory through audio and visual materials. The folklore of

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[779] Ibid.
[780] Samuel F. Yette, "Black Hero Dynamics and the White Media." *The Black World*, (January 1975): 24.
[781] Shana L Redmond, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 401.
[782] Samuel F. Yette, *The Black World*, (January 1975): 27.

Mayweather is an example of exhibiting the exploits of cultural heroes, historical

activities, and Africana people's alignment with their past, present, and future.[783]

Du Bois asserts that the primary utility of Africana art is propaganda. It is a

political tool to propagate Africana cultural reality and reclaim Africana people's ability

to love and enjoy. Mayweather is Monáe's propaganda device to compel Africana women

to compare their beliefs and action with Mayweather's philosophy and activism. Her

listeners find themselves using her folklore to provide context to their own lives. She

entices her listeners to join her in Mayweather's mythical campaign of revolution and

embrace identifying as freedom fighters. This strategy of participation in events leads to

affinity with a particular cause is a "social movement technique. In the process, people

struggle alongside her, inducing them to identify with Monáe."[784] Monáe's presentation

of her folklore emulates "the recovery of historical methods to mobilize the generation of

future and alternative possibilities."[785] The speculative, futuristic, and revolutionary

nature of Monáe's folklore inspires her audience to identify as revolutionary Africana

women.

Clothing as a Liberation Technology

The Matrix, a 1999 science fiction film written and directed by Andy and Lana

Wachowski, follows the protagonist, Neo, as he journeys to become "the One," – the

savior of humanity from the control of artificially intelligent machines. In the story, the

machines have imprisoned the majority of humanity within the Matrix, a computer

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[783] Christel Temple, "Rescuing the Literary in Black Studies." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (2006): 782.

[784] Shana L. Redmond, "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War,"" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no.4 (2011): 394-395.

[785] Ibid.

program that simulates reality in order to deceive humanity into thinking they are acting in control of their lives. The main characters who are not under the control of the Matrix software, wear different clothing in the real world than they do within the Matrix. This alteration of dress is a result of the characters designing their *residual self-image*, a mental project of their digital selves, as a reflection of their free condition within the Matrix. In the film, once Neo is freed from the Matrix, his residual self-image is similar to how he dressed when he was under the control of the machines. As he becomes more comfortable with breaking the rules of the oppressive system, his clothing, hairstyle, and shades would reflect those of his fellow freedom fighters. The leader, Morpheus, the crew of his ship, and most soldiers in the war against the machines wore a similar clothing style that differed from others in the Matrix. They primarily wore black leather outfits to express their free person status. To a certain extent, the attire of the free individuals of the Matrix is reminiscent of the Black leather jacket ensembles s of the members of the Civil Rights organization, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

In her essay "The African American Presence and the Resolution of Race in *The Matrix* Trilogy," Joyce Boyd Melba identifies metaphors in *The Matrix* that relate to the Africana historical experience. She claims that within the film and in Africana culture, freedom requires challenging negative and limiting images of oneself as projected by the oppressive system.[786] Those who resist the socially manufactured images project a complex identity that exemplifies Du Bois' concept of double consciousness - they express their identity using cultural signifiers that can disrupt externally defined myths,

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[786] Melba Joyce Boyd, "The African American Presence and the Resolution of Race in the Matrix Trilogy." *Black Renaissance*. (Spring 2004):130.

and allow themselves to express symbols of their cultural agency. Neo and the other freedom fighters are intimately aware of their choice to either emulate the oppressive perceptions of themselves or "construct a "neo" identity of resistance to perceptions of their inhumanity."[787] In their subversive clothing, they generate a visual lexicon of shirts, jackets, pants, and sunglasses that others may read as an expression of a liberated identity.

Africana people have a long history of expressing their politics through material accouterments such as clothing and accessories. Clothing has been a common indication of an individual's or group's resistance to white cultural oppression. Enslaved Africans stole or acquired the clothes of slaveholders, which they called 'traveling wardrobes' before they attempted to escaped their physical oppressed condition. In an advertisement announcing his freedom, Joe, "a genteel and active Fellow escaped on a fine horse with a large bundle of clothes, including metal buttons, and a silver lac'd hat. Several summer vests, white shirts, and stocking of some are silk."[788] Joe took clothes with him that he associated with freedom. He knew that his status would be interpreted as an enslaved person if he continued to wear homespun clothes, or hand-me-downs from his slaveholder. In the 1970s, Black women wore unprocessed hairstyles such as the Afro, and African-inspired clothing like boubas and caftans to assert their racial pride. They were demonstrating cultural unity and rejecting white cultural aesthetics such as straight hair and western-style dress. The Black Panther Party wore black leather jackets, black

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[787] Ibid.
[788] Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

berets, and sunglasses to show their collectivity and political location. They are a particularly interesting case because not only did their specific uniform became an iconic symbol of a certain type of Africana manhood, but it symbolized how their 'cool aesthetic' was as influential to how the Black Panther party won over the Africana populace as their politics.

Similar to the protagonists in *the Matrix*, Civil Rights activists invested political and aesthetic value in their wardrobe. Women supporting the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would protest in their Sunday best as a strategy to demonstrate to white people that they were human. "Dressing nicer than whites was an act of defiance against the perception that Africana people were inferior."[789] Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists rejected the respectability politics of their peers because they claimed it mirrored the "social hierarchy of the South that relied on dress as a marker of one's social status.[790]" To show their solidarity with the working class, they wore jeans instead of dresses and skirts.

Monáe follows this legacy of clothing style as a manifestation of resistance and cultural expression. Around 2006, "she conjured up her current style: a black suit, white shirt, string tie, accessorized with suspenders, ties, bowties, and saddle shoes."[791] From that moment forward, she has made appearances and performed in what would be considered a tuxedo. She exclusively wore only black and white colors until 2014, when she included shades of red in her clothing spectrum. She credits her monochromatic

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[789] Tanisha Ford. "SNCC Women, Denim and the Politics of Dress." The Journal of Southern History 79, no. 3 (August 2013): 632.
[790] Ibid.
[791] Christian Hoard, "Artist of the Week: Janelle Monáe." *Rolling Stone*. June 30, 2010. Accessed January 9, 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/artist-of-the-week-janelle-monae-20100630.

wardrobe for aiding in her creativity, "I feel very centered when I wear Black and white and I do this when nobody's watching. I create best like that." [792]

Like her predecessors, her traditional uniform is not her primary outfit, but it is her "working" outfit. Monáe wears a residual self-image to call attention to her political location. She puts on her uniform whenever she wants to state a message. In the music video Q.U.E.E.N., Monáe wears a variety of clothing from an emperor like suit, to a short Black and white dress reminiscent of 1960s Motown singers, to tight pants and white blouse with heels. Near the end of the song, she states, "I don't think they understand what I'm trying to say." After her statement, the beat of the music changes and the screen transitions to Monáe donning in her classic black and white suit and saddle shoes standing in a white background. She proceeds to rap various questions to her listeners about the state of oppression. Her uniform is a liberation technology. She wears her uniform to disrupt the socially constructed meaning of a suit from its implicit white, masculine, and multiple social class connotations. In this interruption of predictable interpretation, Monáe pushes an emotional response from her viewers by showing them a Black woman in a suit. While they attempt to location her social position, she invites them to dialogue about the politics of Africans womanhood and the suppression of non-white aesthetic traditions.

In the lyrics for "Q.U.E.E.N," Monáe remarks upon the antagonistic sentiment some have towards her aesthetic. She states, "Hey sister am I good enough for your heaven? Say will your God accept me in my Black and white? Will he approve the way

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[792] Dorian Lynskey, *The Guardian.*

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I'm made? Or should I reprogram, deprogram, and get down?" In the song, Monáe confronts criticisms of some listeners about their assumptions concerning her gender conformity and sexuality due to her wearing what they see as menswear. She retorts back to their assumptions should she alter herself, ignore her reality, or play along to be accepted by the oppressive systems. At the end of her video, she declares, "Even if it makes others uncomfortable, I love who I am." As an Africana woman musical artist from Kansas City, "Monáe is ever alert to the marketplace and her place within it. New and different images of Blackness that are to some extent shocking"[793] challenge the public imagination of black female presence in the public sphere.

Monáe is self-aware of her own performance as an alteration and expansion of mainstream representations of Black womanhood. She states, "I think it's time for someone … to help redefine what a [Black] woman can wear, and how she can dress and wear her hair."[794] David, commenting about the anti-categorization of the musician Erykah Badu, asserts that Badu through her hair, make-up, and clothing style, presents multiple performances of Black womanhood aesthetics in order to critique the standardization of Africana woman.[795] Monáe accomplishes the same thing. She subverts the traditional gender, class, sexual, and historical reading of her clothes. Alternatively, she operates her wardrobe as a tool to confront the intersectional oppression present in externally defined myths of Black womanhood.

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[793] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, *American Studies*, 218; Gail Hilson Woldu, *The Musical Quarterly*, 102.

[794] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no 4 (2013): 221-22.

[795] Marlo David, "Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music." African American Review 41, no. 4. (Winter 2007): 701.

Wardrobe is an important component to Monáe's identity performance. The eccentricity of her clothing is both a choice of aesthetic and a tactic. Her rhetorical style depends upon the influence her outfits have on her audience.

> *Visual styling affects the environment of negotiating one's identity. The principal components of a rhetorical situation (speaker, message, receivers) are primarily affected by the arrangement of the physical surroundings or the sartorial habits of the speaker or his or her friends. In the 1960s we saw Black leather jackets of Bobby Seale's guards, the dashiki-clad youths on the platform behind Maulana Karenga.[796]*

These visual markers set the tone of the space, and enhanced the efficacy of the political message. It would seem insincere or confusing if Karenga spoke of reasserting the prominence of Africana culture in a three-piece suit, or if the Black Panthers wore outfits reminiscent of the upper classes.

The Black Panther Party's main sartorial technique was 'the cool.' They popularized the Africana urban aesthetic and gave it additional signifiers such as 'danger' and 'Black masculine power.' On the other hand, Monáe employs Black dandyism as her "visual language for social change."[797] Dandyism is "a type of performative tradition of social sophistication, cultural refinements, and aesthetic sensitivity.[798] Dandies are often men who dress in the trendiest fashions of the time, and whose mannerisms suggest great wealth, education, and/or taste. Black dandyism, as exampled in Julius Soubise, and the

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[796] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea.* Rev. and Expanded edition. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 50.

[797] Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness : The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 51.

[798] Colin R. Johnson, "Dandyism." *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*. Ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas. Vol. 2. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007,): 369.

singer Prince, is a "signifying practice."[799] It is often seen as "an Africana person being imitative of Western high culture; moreover, it suggests the individual aspires to enter a particular class"[800] different from the one into which they were born. Black dandyism, however, is a dialogic process that expresses Black culture. The Black dandy employs his style to tell "a story about self and society"[801] – often revealing tension between the performance of black agency and the maintenance of externally defined myths of blackness. Monáe expands the dandy technique of sartorial presentation. While her suit, "denotes sophistication and vanity, it is recognized all over the world as clothing of both the elite and servants."[802] When she, a black woman, wears the suit, she expresses an intersectional dandyism that attempts to blur class, gender, and historical boundaries while very naturally revealing the legacy of Africana women and men in suits for numerous reasons including servitude, gender play, and racial uplift. Therefore, her visual presence operates as "a vehicle for a promulgation of progressive ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality."[803]

Sankofic Clothing

Monáe has stated on multiple occasions that her primary reason for wearing the uniform is to pay homage to her parents whose work required them to wear uniforms. "[It is for] my mother, who was a janitor, and my father, who drove trash trucks. It pays

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[799] Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 14.
[800] Ibid.
[801] Ibid.
[802] Miller, Monica. ""A Queer History of Fashion" Symposium: Dr. Monica L. Miller." TACK Magazine. November 13, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2016. http://www.tackmag.com/a-queer-history-of-fashion-symposium-dr-monica-l-miller/.
[803] Ibid.

homage to how they put on a uniform every day and turned something into nothing."[804]

Similar to SNCC women, Monáe politically aligns with the working class. She adopts the

attire of her intended audience to signify solidarity with their condition and to mitigate

the disruptive economic distance between herself and the marginalized. The suit

represents her lack of class mobility despite her access to wealth, and emphasizes that in

a race-based caste system, her intersectional oppression trumps her bank account.

"By re-appropriating the worker's uniform, [Monáe] reclaims the pride and dignity of

laboring Africana women. She transgresses the politics of respectability in order to

mobilize everyday people."[805] She claims that she does not "make music for kings or

queens. She makes music for regular people."[806]

Monáe clad in her signature outfit of tuxedo and saddle shoes, gave audiences a

new perspective on what it means to "dress like a woman" or to dress "genderqueer." The

uniform challenges gender norms because it is read as menswear, as men have traditional

worn suits and ties. Women wearing menswear has been assumed to be an indicator of

homosexuality, a rejection of social norms, and a protest against patriarchy. "Monáe uses

the uniform to dismiss the transhistorical expectations of the female body by commenting

on multiple oppressive conditions through one ensemble."[118] In a dandy-like fashion, she

attempts to exist between the spaces of social expectations.[807] Her defiance of socially

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[804] Molly Hagan, "Janelle Monáe." *Current Biography* 74, no. 5 (May 2013): 80.
[805] Tanisha Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim and the Politics of Dress." *The Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 3 (August 2013), 645.
[806] Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no 4 (2013): 223.
[807] Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

defined gendered aesthetics is reminiscent of the subversive gender play performed by Black women entertainers of the early 20th century.

Blues women such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, and "Big Mama" Thornton donned suits and ties to unsettle how people approached them. By wearing tuxedoes during stage performances and even in public outings, they wore what was considered menswear to challenge Black female inferiority, and give justification (and representation) for their same gender loving activities. For example, Theatre scholar James Wilson asserts, "In her trademark tuxedo, Bentley teased the boundaries between male and female; homosexual and heterosexual, aristocrat and working class. She seemed to revel in occupying an identity in the entertainment world that could only be described as a 'half-shadow no man's land.'"[808] "These women openly defied social norms with regard to both gender and sexuality in both mainstream and Black community contexts."[809]

As she gains popularity in mainstream culture, Monáe's deviance from the visual expectations of 21st-century Black woman musicians initiates conversations about the aesthetics of popular Black women entertainers. "Women performers, across decades, have subscribed to a particular look: think buxom, blond, and leggy" and for Black women, "having a voluptuous rear end was an asset."[810] Monáe does not conform to the unofficial standard of many white and Black female musicians who wear clothes that

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[808] James F. Wilson. *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 163

[809] Layli Phillips and Marla R. Stewart, "'I am just so glad you are alive': New Perspectives on Non-Traditional, Non-conforming, and Transgressive Expressions of Gender, Sexuality, and Race among African Americans." *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 4 (2008): 388.

[810] Gail Hilson Woldu, "Do These Sequins Make My Butt Look Fat? Wardrobe, Image, and the Challenge of Identity in the Music of Black American Women." *The Musical Quarterly* 96 (2013): 101.

show their curves, or emphasize their breasts and butt. She has a "smart retro look that is

utterly at odds with the hypersexualized standard for female R&B acts."[811]

Fashion blogger Christie Garner remarks,

*As a woman in fashion, I often run into grown women who think the skin
revealing, curve hugging form of sexy is the only goal/look to aspire to.
Like that is the only way to be attractive. Janelle just stomps all over that.
She is beautiful, vibrant, and dare I say sexy in her own right.[812]*

Monáe "redefines what a Black female body could look like and how it could perform in

the [21st century] and beyond."[813] Through her uniform, Monáe presents a possibility that

Black womanhood on stage can be performed in a skin-tight bodysuit or a suit and tie.

Others wear the Monáe

Because she has worn almost the same uniform in many venues and different

occasions, it acts similarly to the costume of a comic book character. Just like in cartoons

and comics, the heroes or protagonists tend to wear the same set of clothes, armor, or

costume in each episode of issue. This repetition allows the character to be recognizable,

and their clothes to act as an extension of their characteristics. The red, blue, and gold

skin-tight outfit, with a red cape reads as Superman. A black or grey skintight outfit or

armor with a bat insignia recalls the comic book hero Batman. Even without the man

wearing the costume, the mix of colors and symbols recalls the traits of the hero in the

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[811] Miller, Monica. ""A Queer History of Fashion" Symposium: Dr. Monica L. Miller." TACK Magazine. November 13, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2016. http://www.tackmag.com/a-queer-history-of-fashion-symposium-dr-monica-l-miller/.

[812] Chastity Garner, "Celebrity Style Capture: Janelle Monae." *GarnerStyle |The Curvy Girl Guide.* September 18, 2013. Accessed December 6, 2013. http://garnerstyle.blogspot.com/2013/09/celebrity-style-capture-janelle-monae.html

[813] Tanisha Ford. "SNCC Women, Denim and the Politics of Dress." The Journal of Southern History 79, no. 3 (August 2013): 647.

mind of the reader. Monáe's uniform acts similarly. Although she may change the details,

the black and white suit with pompadour hairstyle is her hero costume.

Figure 9: Various Africana Women cosplaying Monáe[814]

As stated earlier in this work, Monáe exemplifies the black hero dynamic with her

folktale of Mayweather. As the folktale and reality blur due to Monáe's multidimensional

performance, she expresses heroic traits as both the folk teller and the protagonist of the

folklore. As this radical Africana woman heroic character, she is both "individual and yet

universal, human and yet superhuman…She exists as a unique visual symbol that has a

profound effect on the perceptions, attitudes and interpretations of reality" of her

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[814]Kimberly Christian, Instagram post, November 1, 2013.
https://www.instagram.com/p/gKPwXflGff/; Chastity Garner, "Celebrity Style Capture: Janelle Monae." *GarnerStyle |The Curvy Girl Guide.* September 18, 2013. Accessed December 5, 2013. http://garnerstyle.blogspot.com/2013/09/celebrity-style-capture-janelle-monae.html; P.A. "A Natural Hair Inspired Halloween." *D'aller Naturel.* October 31, 2014. Accessed December 6, 2015. http://dallernaturel.com/2014/10/31/a-natural-hair-inspired-halloween/

viewers.[815] With her style, Monáe opens up the possibility for Africana women to experience an alternative Africana womanhood through the wearing of clothing. They participate in a practice more commonly known as *cosplaying*.

> *Cosplay is a performative action in which one dons a costume and/or accessories and manipulates his or her posture, gesture, and language in order to demonstrate devotion, admiration, or allegiance to a given body and a set of texts. For the cosplayer, it is a somatic, material, and textual practice. [Cosplay is most often associated with mimicking the appearance and mannerisms of a comic book, video game, manga, or anime characters.][816] For instance, if a cosplayer chose to portray Batman that individual would need to produce a sign or, more likely, a set of signs with their attire and performance that would generate an association between his or her body and the "parent text" being referenced. This could be accomplished by wearing single or multiple items – a cape, Batman's iconic mask, or cowl, or by imitating particular gesture or quoting dialogue from one of the many Batman texts.[817]*

Cosplay "is a break from identity, one that mirrors the dress-up antics associated with George Clinton, Grace Jones, and other eccentric luminaries now dubbed Afrofuturists. While it's all play, there's a power in breaking past rigid identity parameters and adopting the persona of one's favorite hero."[818] Cosplay empowers the cosplayer. It gives the cosplayer a sense of "possibility of what they can be or what they can do."[819] For the most part, when white people cosplay, they are reflecting the morals and standards of their reality. In the Western world, most superheroes are white and the

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[815] Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes please stand up?!': A Critical Analysis of the mythology and culture significance of Black Superheroes." *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation.* eds. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald Jackson II, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 225-26.

[816] Ibid., 225-226.

[817] Mathew Hale, "Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic." *Western Folklore* 73, no. 1 (2014): 8.

[818] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.

[819] Ibid.

social norms, attitudes, and morals of their universe mirror the norms, attitudes, and moral of white society. When a white cosplayer becomes Batman, they do not have to completely suspend reality in order to perform a Batman identity. Batman's actions and behaviors are not antithetical or destructive to their being. Whereas an Africana girl wearing a Batman costume cannot fully embody the characteristics of being a privileged, white, male. Her cosplay becomes a superfluous act, or possible damaging to her personal and cultural development.[820] On the other hand, cosplaying culturally relevant heroes can empower marginalized individuals to subvert the narrow roles they are assigned under white cultural domination. [821]

> *Cosplaying [as an Africana woman] inherently pushes against many externally defined stereotypes of Black womanhood. It pushes against the boundaries of what white culture expects Africana women to be and do. In cosplaying, an Africana woman can imagine a whole set of possibilities that extend beyond the cosplay experience. It gives Africana women a new perspective. Cosplay puts imagination and desire into action in a way that allows people to look at things differently.[822]*

Since her debut, Black women and girls have donned Monáe's signature suit, tie, and saddle shoes at costume parties and other celebratory events, and sometimes, they wear it without a special occasion. These women and girls wear the uniform because they appreciate her music and political message. They are drawn to "imitate her version of femininity with the hope that by mimicking her style, gives them a measure of her power."[823] Monáe's style is an accessible template for other Africana women to copy.

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[820] Kenneth Ghee, *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation,* 229.
[821] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* Kindle Edition.
[822] Ibid.
[823] Jean Wyatt, "Patricia Hill Collins' Black Sexual Politics and the Genealogy of the Strong Black Woman." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 9 (2008): 64.

The simplicity of the suit and its ubiquity in both the lower and upper classes allow

African women to reproduce the visual symbols of Monáe easily. Black women cosplay

Monáe in more subtle ways than science fiction and fantasy cosplayers. They do not wear

their costume at conventions of like-minded individuals, but at the workplace. They may

wear a semblance of her wardrobe at Halloween, or at a friend's wedding. They may not

wear the entire uniform, but they may wear black and white clothing, style their hair in a

pompadour, or just wear a pair of saddle shoes. When people cosplay Monáe, they

emulate her characteristics, and recognize their own ability to imagine themselves

contrarily to stereotypes of Black women. Clothing allows them the freedom to put on

and take off particular identities. Africana women can remove the clothes they wore as a

means to react to externally defined myths of Africana womanhood, and put on clothes

that allow them to perform their identity similarly to Monáe, who they perceive as an

identity of liberation and Africana futures.[824]

The women who wear a Monáe costume have a "psychic identification with her.

Because they wear Monáe, she influenced their attitudes, cognition, and memory."[825]

When interviewed, Monáe cosplayers acknowledge that Monáe is an image they are

proud to perform because she aligns more succinctly with their identity. They are not

playing "a womanhood, that even temporarily" misrepresents their culture, values, or

ancestors. Essentially, they are putting on a sankofic, revolutionary, "alternative" Black

womanhood, and have the opportunity to practice Black womanhood differently - even if

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[824] Tanisha Ford, "Soul Generation: Radical Fashion, Beauty, and the Transnational Black Liberation Movement, 1954-1980." (dissertation, Indiana University, 2011), 131.
[825] Kenneth Ghee, *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation,* 227.

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only for a day. On the December 2, 2014 *Queen Latifah Show*, 10 year old McKynzie

Duhon from Louisiana, wore a shiny black and white outfit with her hair in a pompadour.

She was on the show to show her appreciation for the singer by singing one of her songs,

Duhon expressed that Monáe "makes me feel that I can achieve all my goals...when I

dressed up as Janelle Monáe, I felt that I can have courage and confidence, that I could be

an electric lady...I feel fearless and confident and that I can do anything."[826] Monáe's

uniform encourages and allows others to participate in her visual language of social

change. They willingly opt to wear identities of liberation, and not identities of Africana

cultural destruction.

Since the release of her most recent album, *The Electric Lady,* Monáe has limited

the appearance of her androgynous "uniform" and has begun incorporating dresses,

letterman jackets, yoga pants, tracksuits, etc. into her wardrobe. Yet, she continues to

utilize clothing as a visual device to disrupt stereotypes and encourage alternate thinking

and agential action. Africana historian Tanisha Ford explains that activist Ella Baker

educated SNCC women about the utility of the uniform. She informed her students "it

was politically savvy to know when to put on and take off the uniform."[827] Taking their

mentor's words to heart, SNCC women wore jeans in solidarity with the Black farmers,

and depending upon the circumstances, they wore their Sunday best. Since 2013, Monáe

has followed the wisdom of Baker. She still exclusively wears black, white, and red, but

her uniform is reserved for special occasions such as at the end of the Q.U.E.E.N music

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[826] ""Dirty Jobs" Host Mike Rowe and an Emotional Interview with Music's Janelle Monae." In Queen Latifah Show. December 2, 2014

[827] Tanisha Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim and the Politics of Dress." *The Journal of Southern* History 79, no. 3 (August 2013), 646.

video. Like the Afrofuturist artists before her who donned space gear and metallic pants, Monáe contributes to the broad body of Black future speculation by changing her sartorial habits.[828]

Contemporarily, Monáe encourages other cosplaying opportunities. In the music video for "Electric Lady," Monáe pays homage to the HBCU experience, and the Black fraternities and sororities. In her early days in Atlanta, Monáe performed at dorm parties of the many HBCUs there such as Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Clark Atlanta University. She has fond memories of her experiences, and understands the communal value of black organizations and institutions. Within her science fiction universe, she creates her own sorority of phenomenal women, the Electro-Phi-Betas.[829] Monáe links the present and the future by making many Electro-Phi-Betas alumna women of R&B and Hip-Hop fame, such as Estelle, Esperanza Spalding, T-Boz, Monica, and Kimbra.

The song, "Electric Lady," operates as an anthem for revering the "carefree" and political conscious Africana womanhood. In the song, Monáe sings that the Electric Lady, "Wearing tennis shoes or in flats or in stilettos, Illuminating all that she touches, eye on the sparrow. A modern day Joan of Arc or Mia Farrow."[830] In another line she

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[828] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture.* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), Kindle Edition; Howard Rambsy II, "Beyond Keeping It Real: OutKast, the Funk Connection, and Afrofuturism." *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 210.

[829] In the "Chrome Shoppe" interlude, DJ Crash Crash announces that the Electro Phi Betas are sponsoring the party at the youth auditorium in the name of Mayweather. The two women promoting the concert are Melanie 45221 and Assata 8550 (who are both androids - as shown by their classification numbers, and Africana women); they claim they will protect Mayweather from the bounty hunters. The sorority supports and protects the revolution that Mayweather brings.

[830] "Electric Lady," *The Electric Lady.*2013.

declares, "We the kind of girls who ain't afraid to get down, Electric ladies go on and scream out loud"[831]

After publishing the music video, Monáe began to sell Electro Phi Beta letterman jackets and sweatshirts on her website, jmonae.com. This enabled more people to wear a part of her universe, as well as align themselves with revolution brought on by Mayweather/Monáe.

Figure 10: Women wearing Electro Phi Beta Letterman jackets [832]

End

In the 21st century, Monáe generates new stories that offer alternative culturally supporting archetypes of Africana womanhood that can challenge stereotypes' influence. With her folklore and her clothing, she "initiates a dialogue about the influence of

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[831] Ibid.

[832] Wanda Lotus, "The Sisters of Electro Phi Beta: Jess and Me." *Bits and Bytes*. October 12, 2014. Accessed December 6, 2015. http://wandalotus.net/2014/10/12/photography/the-sisters-of-electro-phi-beta-jess-and-me/.

Africana womanhood upon the maintenance of either Africana social development or white cultural domination."[833]

Monáe presents a wardrobe that redefines the aesthetic of a Black female artist and a Black woman in general. Her color scheme and style both resemble traits of a dandy, a sartorial expression that emphasizes through clothing the "problematics of being looked at and being seen."[834] As a member of a marginalized group, Monáe's racial, gender, and class grouping overdetermined how others interpret her performance; however, her clothing, in its eccentricity, forces her viewers to take a break from their automatic interpretations. They must renegotiate their understanding of racial, cultural, and class-based signifiers of identity. For Africana women, this generates an epistemological space in which they can think about adopting or adding to their repository of identity performances; they have a chance to break from dialoguing solely with externally defined myths, and instead interrogate their identity based on intra-cultural speculation of what Africana womanhood aesthetics could look like.[835]

Monáe's folklore supports the construction of Africana gender as sankofic, Afrofuturist, and dynamic. She utilizes folk telling tactics of asynchronous call and response in combination with the narrative of a mythic figure to "draw her audience to imagine black lives and black futures that are not the happy endings of white cultural

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[833] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 20.
[834] Monica Miller, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Dandy as Diasporic Race Man;" *Callaloo* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 744.
[835] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 20.

domination."[836] Mayweather is a culturally relevant and revolutionary character, and Monáe's audience is likely to respond with positive emotions towards her character, as well as adopt her politics. Within the folklore, Monáe provides multiple instances of Africana morality, political strategy, and history from an Afrofuturism perspective. Monáe "pushes her viewer/listeners to think about the appearance of Africana experiences post-enslavement, colonialism, racism, sexism, and other forms of personal and communal oppression. She hopes that they will conceive of liberation as something to be constructed, instead of something currently available."[837]

One could argue, "The story does not bear logical sense," as the doctor remarks in the liner notes about Patient 57821 (aka alterMonáe) in the Palace of the Dogs. [838] Even with the two albums after *Metropolis* providing some additional context, the folklore of Mayweather is a jumble of symbols, allusions, and metaphors. Although I have presented a relatively linear narrative for research purposes, the impact of her message does not manifest from cobbling together pieces of storyline from a large variety of sources. Monáe "creates influential technologies that empower Africana women to embody identities that align with their own cultural reality."[839] Her aim is to influence her audience and inspire them to create positive change for their community.

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[836] Anthony Reed, "African Space Programs: Spaces and Times of the Black Fantastic." *Souls* 16, no. 3(2014): 368-69.
[837] Ibid.
[838] Liner Notes, *The ArchAndroid*, 2013.
[839] Francesca T. "Royster. Janelle Monáe's Collective Vision." In *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 191.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

"[Afrofuturism] manufactures its own mythologies."[840]

In this dissertation, my objective was to demonstrate that Sojourner Truth and Janelle Monáe operated their identity performances - in both its fantastic and mundane forms - as liberation technologies that transgress externally defined myths of Black womanhood. Afrofuturism was classified as a theoretical perspective in which to analyze the Africana agential imperative, as well as to interrogate the meaning of Africana women's practices. From this position, Afrofuturism could be used to guide research about instruments used for Africana social development by Africana agents. In order to provide the most effective manner by which to analyze Africana women's phenomena, Afrofuturism was linked to technological agency and the Africana tradition of recognizing the relationship between the agent and their tools. I recognize Truth and Monáe's identity performance as a sankofic intervention in order to recall how the technologies operated by Africana women function to assist in Africana liberation.

I argued that Truth and Monáe use their performance texts in ways that utilize Africana practices such as storytelling and myth making. Truth told the tale of a revolutionary Black womanhood, and used photographs, her narrative, and her speeches to inundate the public sphere with a new vocabulary of how to interpret Black womanhood. Similarly, Monáe's construction of both a revolutionary superhero and a

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[840] Kodwo Eshun, "Stealing One's Own Corpse: Afrofuturism as Speculative Heresy," in *The Shadows Took Shape*, curated by Naima J. Keith, Zoe Whitley, and Lauren Haynes, (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), 118.

fashion icon stirs in Africana women the desire to emulate traits of liberation, and personify Black womanhood on their own terms. Truth and Monáe "break the chains that limit [Black women's] ability to imagine a liberated African woman who exists beyond the world of stereotypes."[841] Their actions result in Africana women being able to "free their minds" to imagine constructing their own identities from their own cultural centers.

Truth and Monáe's identity performances are part of a collective of Black womanhood representations that serve as vehicles of Africana culture. Like most cultural manifestations, when Africana agents activate Africana culture, African culture thrives, adapts, and changes. Since the Africana cultural experience is vast and the possibilities of Africana social development are limitless, the Black womanhoods that Truth and Monáe present mirror the dynamic and multifaceted Africana culture and its future.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In my location theory textual analysis of Truth and Monáe's performance texts, I may unintentionally imply that the technological contributions of "average" Black women seem trifling and ineffective because they do not operate on a mass scale. Due to my limited scope, I do not detail the extent of Africana women's instrumentation in endeavors to fight misrepresentation nor examine how other Africana women fight other oppressive technologies such as capitalism, sexism, homophobia, etc. A limitation of my work is that the data is relatively convenient. I examine the actions of two popular Africana women whose actions are accessible for information and criticism. I analyzed the ways Truth and Monáe used their identity performance to engage in liberatory practices, but I only show the efforts of two women who use their mannerisms, clothing

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[841] Walter Mosley, "Black to the Future." *New York Times Magazine,* (November 1, 1998): 36.

styles, and other manifestations of their identity as mechanisms that can induce liberatory actions in other Black women. My overall purpose was to provide a starting point to discuss Africana women's construction of complex and community-oriented tools that function to generate Africana liberation.

Towards the end of *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins remarked that while the actions of prominent Africana women are highly visible, "the myriad ways in which ordinary individuals from all walks of life work for social justice in small yet highly significant ways" remain hidden to scholarship.[842] She mentions that the actions of everyday Black women to engage in liberation do not have as much of a platform – in both real life and academic texts - as those women who are in the public eye. Empirical research that gathers information about individual actions from less famous agents of Africana culture is spread around multiple disciplines of the academy, and many of those studies still approach Africana women as if they are only affected by phenomena and are not creators of phenomena. This lack of Africana agency-centered research serves to maintain the paucity of analysis on the experiences and creations of Africana women. Elizabeth Higginbotham's 1982 survey of sociological literature on Black women still rings true when she stresses that while many scholars are "abandoning a deviant perspective" of Africana womanhood, "the current state of the field calls for more empirical work and the development of perspective which seeks to reveal the complex lives of Black women."[843]

This dearth of research into the smaller "everyday" actions of "average" Africana women hurts the future development of Black Women Studies and Africana Studies. By

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[842] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 307.
[843] Evelyn Higginbotham, "Two Representative Issues in Contemporary Sociological Work on Black women." In But Some of Us are Brave, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982, 97.

only disclosing certain people's actions, scholars leave the bulk of Black women's experiences hidden. Particular segments of the whole story are left untold, and we remain ignorant to those smaller scale phenomena that may be the most important.

In future research, I want to analyze what instruments Black women of all lifestyles develop and implement to challenge stereotypes and increase Africana agency in their personal spheres of influence. "In the tenuous relationship between national discourses of white superiority and patriarchy and the everyday practices of Africana people," Black women are constantly battling for recognition of their variety of Africana womanhood when they walk outside, attend school, go to work, watch TV, talk to friends, find sexual and romantic partners, etc.[844] These smaller negotiations between African women and the EDMs of Black womanhood occur repeatedly across the globe in the same destructive environment that more well-known Africana women inhabit. I posit that these everyday struggles Black women face to affirm themselves and their fellow Africana women probably have a greater or equal impact than some of the more well-known interventions by more famous individuals. An analysis geared to examine the nature of their methods, and what effects they have on their community, would expand the discourse of what a normal Black woman can do to transgress EDMs.

In previous scholarship, Afrofuturism functions to classify and criticize art, literature, music, and technology that appear to blend Africana culture, "high technology," and/or future-orientation. In more recent essays about the nature of Afrofuturism, there is not a stable definition as to its link to Africana social development, or how its handles technological evaluation. I want this dissertation to be a stepping-stone for establishing other theoretical conceptions in Afrofuturism, particularly theories that investigate the speculative and potentiality aspects of Africana philosophical thought. For

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[844] Shana L Redmond, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 395.

instance, the treatment of time is an area of inquiry that makes frequent but short appearances in Afrofuturism discourse. Afrofuturism disrupts the assumption of the European linear concepts of time, and the idea that future events will arrive directly after past and present events. With reference to the sampling of Ray Charles' music in the songs of Kanye West, Outkast, and will.i.am,[845] to name a few, Mark Fisher claims, "Time in Afrofuturism is plastic, stretchable and prophetic—it is, in other words, a *technologised* time, in which past and future are subject to ceaseless de- and recomposition."[846] Quotes like these are scattered throughout Afrofuturism scholarship, but there are few examinations of how the cyclical nature of time within the Africana worldview applies to speculation and future action of its Africana agents. Explorations of Africana culture's different technological and futuristic concepts would enlarge Afrofuturism's epistemological scope and potential applications.

Moreover, I want to develop the analytical capability of Afrofuturism. By expanding the boundaries of the application of Afrofuturism, it allows for including Afrofuturistic analyses that interrogate agential applications, technological processes, and the future necessity of certain instruments and concepts. For instance, I would like to conduct an experiment that uses the technological vocabulary of Nnedi Okorafor's science fiction to educate Africana women in STEM concepts. Okorafor's vision of technology from an Africana perspective includes woman-centered ideas such as cooperation and motherly protection, which would be culturally relevant to students, and would promote an understanding of technology that does not repeat a narrative of human

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[845] I Got a Woman (1954) was sampled in Gold Digger by Kanye West feat. Jamie Foxx (2005);Yes Indeed!! (1958) was sampled in Spread by OutKast (2003); and What'd I Say (1959) was sampled in Mamma Mia by will.i.am (2007); "Ray Charles." *Who Sampled: Exploring the DNA of Music.* Accessed October 12, 2015. http://www.whosampled.com/Ray-Charles/

[846] Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology," *Dancecult: A Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 47.

progress that distances itself from nature and corporality. Using Afrofuturist creative productions as a tool for education becomes another tool in the toolbox of Africana liberation.

I end this dissertation with a suggestion that technological education needs to be a requirement for liberation. Historical education and personal empowerment are critical in developing a sense of agency within Africana people. The various power structures that limit Africana agency have made many Africana people forget that they are the masters of their culture's destiny. After (or while) amplifying their knowledge and psyche, scholars and activists should aim to increase and strengthen Africana people's ability to dream. Developing methods that augment Africana agents' imagination and creativity is an important step to help generate liberation, and foster an Africana social development. In particular, teaching Africana people to approach technology development from an Ogunic heritage – where they contemplate the function of a tool within their Africana society, and ensure that the tool meets the need of their society. The construction of an Africana liberated future requires Africana agents not only to desire freedom, but also to desire imaging what is needed to achieve it. If Africana people have the right skills and the effective tools, then they can clearly see that the path to liberation is not fraught with implausibility but with potentiality.

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