Amerikastudien

American Studies

**Archives
of Resistance:**
Picturing the Black Americas

Dustin Breitenwischer, Jasmin Wrobel,
and Robert F. Reid-Pharr
(Guest Editors)

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Archives of Resistance: Picturing the Black Americas

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Key Words: archive; resistance; picture theory; visual culture; the Americas

Picturing in the Archive: Images and Imagination[1]

"Where there is power, there is resistance," writes Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, "and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned" (95). Turning this insight onto the discussion of what we frame as "archives of resistance," one might argue that there is no outside of the archive, only intrinsic dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, contestation, and substitution. Accordingly, the archive is clearly more than a space or a practice of collecting, storing, and distributing. Rather, it is a highly communicative space and an extraordinarily competitive practice of assembling and reassembling, stating and testifying, intervening and witnessing, and not least of identifying and destabilizing established identities.[2] This special issue, "Archives of Resistance: Picturing the Black Americas," brings together artists and scholars from the fields of Latin American and North American studies, African American studies, comparative literature, and media studies to discuss visual archives that decidedly resist established canons and archives of Black American imagery and biased imaginations of Blackness as part of the cultural legacies of slavery and colonization. The contributions foreground processes of resistant archival practices in the arts and media from a trans-American perspective.[3] Despite their

2 Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor think of archives "as engines of circulation, as archival acts or practices that both mobilize different media and are mobilized by them. Instead of valuing notions of fixity, authenticity, and legitimacy, we look at the archives as the site of potentiality, provisionality, and contingency." In his introduction to a recent special issue of *Anglia*, Daniel Stein reflects upon the archive's inherent "agency" (345) and its dynamic status of being "always preliminary, always tenuous, and always in flux" (346), and thus delineates an understanding of the archive as "living," which refers less to a sense of organicism than praxeology, and which, understood as such, informs this issue immensely. See also Stein's contribution to this issue. For more on the concept of the "living archive," see Hall.

3 Cf. Hirsch and Taylor, who also engage in a trans-American perspective in their themed issue.

individual, local, and, above all, complex peculiarities, the archives discussed here have not been built within the confines of national borders and imaginaries, but by wide-ranging and highly dynamic transnational (and ultimately post-/colonial) mechanisms of representation and visualization. These mechanisms have emerged from a common history and/or experience of colonialism, slavery, segregation, and systemic anti-Black violence, and they refer to and (re)shape each other reciprocally across the Americas.[4]

At least since the first Africans were violently taken to South America as slaves around 1540, practices of picturing the Black Americas have produced a variety of representations that range from the disturbingly violent and the grotesquely absurd to the politically empowering and the beautifully enchanting. From meticulous blueprints of cargo spaces in the bellies of slave ships to caricatures of Jim Crow minstrelsy and lynching photography; from Jean-Baptiste Debret's lithographs of enslaved women and men in nineteenth-century Brazil to urban murals; and from Emory Douglas's drawings in *The Black Panther* newspaper to Kara Walker's silhouettes, the cultural history of the Americas is a history of intersecting and conflicting, of public and private, of accessible and hidden, of repulsive and progressive, and of disturbing and endearing pictorial archives that define, question, resist, or reconsider the social and aesthetic imagination of Blackness. In the production of an ever-growing archive that shapes the imagination of the Black Americas, picturing is the quintessential practice. Be it in the disparate stream of images in the individual and cultural imaginary or in the production of physical artifacts in art and media: modes of picturing have for the longest time formed and informed Black subjectivity.

The history of the Americas is significantly marked by modes of neglect and suppression, by absences and exclusion. Whether we look at practices of paratextual patronization in nineteenth-century literature, the literary canonization before the "culture wars," or at the different social and aesthetic modes of enforcing retreat and withdrawal in the Black diasporic art and literature of the past decades through the present, forms and practices of visibility and invisibility feature all-too prominently and shape much of the transnational cultural imaginary. And these forms and practices have, by the nature and logic of their sensual perception, always revolved heavily around pictorial archives, creative resistance, and the poetics of picturing, which, as we understand it here, is a social and aesthetic practice that materializes in complex networks of human and non-human actors, and in a variety of arts and media that often inform each other across generations. We may want to think of the photographic reimagination of the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) in Jeff Wall's "After the 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue" (2000), or the revisiting of Bantu iconographies and symbols in Marcelo D'Salete's graphic novels *Cumbe* (2014) and *Angola Janga* (2017).[5] Or we may want to consider historical accounts of Black

4 For the intricacy of (anti-)racism, Black and Brown experiences, and visual culture, see, among others, Wade, Scorer, and Aguiló; Cardoso; Gockel; Sheehan. With regards to comics and graphic narratives, see Strömberg; Howard and Jackson; Whitted; Chinen; and the research project "Comics and Race in Latin America" at the University of Manchester. Hillary Chute refers to the potential of graphic narratives to "incorporate or physically represent concrete archives." See also Irribarren Ortiz's contribution to this issue.

5 See Wall's work on the Museum of Modern Art's website: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/88085. For more on D'Salete, see Wrobel.

(in)visibility in the Americas such as George Reid Andrews's *Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay* (2010), Erika Denise Edwards's *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic* (2020), or Herman Bennett's studies on the Afro-Mexican presence in early modern times. In these studies, Bennett draws attention to the neglected question of why New Spain was, at one time, home to the largest free Black population in the Americas, and he asks whether the recovery of history can "avert the impact of colonial rule on the formation of an archive" (*Africans in Colonial Mexico* 10; see also Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*, and *Colonial Blackness*).[6]

Archives of resistance decidedly move beyond the purpose of collection, categorization, and provision. They are, in and of themselves, creative agents in that they store and simultaneously shape and reform images and imaginations. As such, archives of resistance are counter-archives that not only circumvent but explicitly and confrontationally break with the hegemonic gaze of colonial rule, White supremacist imagination, and racist stereotyping.[7] In *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe inadvertently alludes to the interventionist impulse of resistant archives by (re)considering moments of invisibility in the social and cultural history of the Black Americas. Sharpe asks "what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival"? (14). Drawing on the intersecting practices of picturing and archiving, Sharpe ventures into the relationship between "imaging" and "imagining," using portraiture as her medium of choice:

> If we understand portraiture to be both the "art of creating portraits" (image and text) and "graphic and detailed description," how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures? Much of the work of Black imaging and the work that those images do out in the world has been about such imaginings of the fullness of Black life. (115)

Arguably, this has held true ever since the advent of early photographic technology and the detachment of Black image-making from the gaze, pencil, brush, and imagination of White picture-making.

Picturing Frederick Douglass: A Paradigm

Processes and practices of picturing eventually translate into processes and practices of archiving, potentially turning the archive into an interrelated network of cultural resistance. In that regard, the mid-nineteenth century was not only marked by a paradigm shift in the (hi)story of human picture-making but also by the promise of archives that were, until then, outright unimaginable. Early photographic technology, from

6 In this context, see also Agnes Lugo-Ortiz's essay on the (dis)appearances of the "slave's face as dominant and distinctive element of the visual archive of transatlantic slavery."

7 For the cultural and social history of resistance in philosophy, art, and political theory, see (in German) the expansive research of Iris Därmann, especially *Widerstände*; *Undienlichkeit*; and (with Michael Wildt) *Widerständigkeit*. For resistance as marronage, see Roberts.

the ambrotype to the daguerreotype, has revolutionized the production, distribution, and reproducibility of images. For Black Americans across the United States, most notably for the social reformer Frederick Douglass, it sparked the idea that the democratization of artistic technology and practice could be translated into moral and political progress. In 2015, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier collected, published, and analyzed a fascinating archive, a body of 160 separate photographs of Douglass, who was the most photographed U.S. American of the nineteenth century (at least among persons of public interest). In *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, the three editors show that Douglass, throughout his life as fugitive slave and freedman, purposely built an archive of photographic portraits. Douglass knew that in the modern world, an individual's legacy—as well as a community's—depended on its representation and perpetuation in images.

Accordingly, Douglass did not only enjoy being the subject of picture-making practices; he was also a brilliant theoretician of this newly developed technology (cf. Breitenwischer; Stauffer). Between 1861 and 1865, when the United States was fighting a civil war over the future of their union, Douglass toured the Northern states with different lectures about picture theory, photographic technology, and democracy. Against the backdrop of his conviction that "the picture-making faculty of man is a chief element of all that is religious and poetic about us" ("Lecture on Pictures" 132) and in light of an increased hope that the war would lead to a victory of the Union and hence to the abolition of slavery across the entire United States (particularly after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863), Douglass understood the invention of early photographic techniques in an existential interrelation of technological, political, and moral progress. "Material progress," he asserted, "may for a time be separated from moral progress. But the two cannot be permanently divorced" ("Lecture on Pictures" 140), only to add in "Age of Pictures" that "[t]he brazen ribs of slavery and despotism […] must break down under the pressure of physical progress. All material improvements look toward freedom and unity of man" (159).

For Douglass, photography and the affordance to have one's picture taken constitutes the technologically enabled liberation from the White gaze, which he, according to an 1849 review of Wilson Armistead's *A Tribute for the Negro*, felt everywhere. "Negroes," he wrote,

> can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy. ("A Tribute" 2)

Until the advent of photographic picture-making and the ensuing ability to curate one's own pictorial archive, picturing Black subjectivity predominantly was a matter of pseudo-scientifically infused stereotyping.

Aside from the egalitarian spirit of photography, Douglass scrutinized pictorial representation of Black Americans in a way that would resonate strikingly in W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art," in which Du Bois provocatively wonders, "[s]uppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?" (102). The future of picturing was in the hands of photography, which enabled an unbiased, morally unencumbered, and lasting representation that many viewed as the epitome of human progress, social inclusion, and Black emancipation and self-empowerment. As Douglass put it, "[t]he humblest servant girl, whose income is but a few shillings per week, may now possess a more perfect likeness of herself than noble ladies and even royalty" ("Lecture on Pictures" 127), for "[f]ormerly the luxury of a likeness was the exclusive privilege of the rich and great; but now, like education and a thousand other blessings brought to us by the advancing march of light and civilization, such pictures are brought within the easy reach of the humblest members of society" ("Age of Pictures" 143).

Both in his lectures and in his desire to have his picture taken, Douglass was invested in the future, legacy, and lasting impact of the visibility and transgenerational relatability of Black subjectivity in the United States (and beyond). Douglass urged Black Americans in the United States and the Black diaspora to build their own pictorial archives. He thus highlighted the need for and the lack of proper self-archiving practices that marked Black life well into the nineteenth century, producing, as Michael A. Chaney notes in *Fugitive Vision*, conflicting effects. "Countless images of tree-climbing slaves escaping dogs and Elizas leaping over ice cakes circulated the culture, emblazoned on everything from the pages of newspapers and books to plate ware, toys, and pillows. Paradoxically," Chaney continues, "these proliferating scenes presumably marketed to denounce slavery's dehumanization of the African American body replicated and amplified the process by which the slave was reduced to an object of commodification, becoming nothing more than a marketplace signifier of self-dispossession" (6). Douglass's implicit call for expanded picturing and self-archiving in the Black community sought to annihilate the status of endlessly commodified object. In fact, according to Douglass, the technological process of photography itself might serve that purpose, for it allows its subject "to posit his own subjective nature outside of himself, giving it form, color, space, and all the attributes of distinct personality, so that it becomes the subject of distinct observation and contemplation." And this, Douglass concludes in "Pictures and Progress," "is at [the] bottom of all effort and the germinating principles of all reform and all progress" (170).

Archives of Resistance

Douglass's cultural call to arms during the Civil War and the early Reconstruction era was a call to establish what we frame as archives of resistance. In a letter from 1870 to the befriended printer Louis Prang, Douglass wrote accordingly,

> [h]eretofore, colored Americans have thought little of adorning parlors with pictures. […] Pictures come not with slavery and oppression and destitution, but with liberty, fair play, leisure, and refinement. These conditions are now possible to colored American citizens, and I think the walls of their houses will soon begin to bear evidence of their altered relations to the people about them. […] Every colored householder in the land should have one of these portraits in his parlor, and should explain it to his children, as the dividing line between darkness and despair that overhung our past, and the light and hope that now beam upon our future as a people. (37)

So, in his reading of Douglass's lectures, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes that "Douglass was acutely aware that *images* matter, especially when one's rhetorical strategy had been fashioned around the trope of chiasmus, the reversal of the black slave-object into the black sentient citizen-subject" (204; emphasis in original). Building on Douglass's efforts to construct an emphatically resistant archive that ultimately "reverses" objecthood into self-empowered subjectivity and spans generations, this issue focuses on practices and objects of picture-making that feed into Douglass's hope and desire to create a visual archive beyond the typecasting forces of race and racism.

Accordingly, as the title of Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith's *Pictures and Progress* (2012) suggests, for many Black Americans picture-making after the invention of early photographic processes meant the equation of technological and social advancement, which turned archiving practices into modes of social, political, and cultural self-positing. The technological progress in picture-making thus allowed Black Americans "to perform identities and to shape a dynamic visual culture" (13), and ultimately build and curate ever-growing archives. All of which, of course, played out not only in the archiving of images as a political or an intimately private enterprise, but also and substantially as a mode of artistic communication through the implementation of Black imagery by Black artists ("imagery" understood in the broadest sense as a product of picturing in literature and the visual arts).[8] As such, the production and accumulation of artistic representations of Black life and Black experience across the Americas (and beyond) were, by definition, interventionist practices that sought to enrich as well as destabilize established aesthetic norms. In a way, the archiving of such artistic interventions was in and of itself an expression of political claims for social reform.

Thus did the early-twentieth-century debate arise between Alain Locke and Du Bois over the question of whether all Black art self-ev-

8 For more on literature—and particularly the novel—as a mode of self-institutionalizing the Black experience, see Cloutier. On comics and graphic narratives, see the interview with artists Breena Nuñez, André Diniz, and Marcelo D'Salete in this issue.

idently is or at least should strive to be propaganda in the name of liberation, self-empowerment, and, as mentioned above, self-positing. Du Bois, of course, argued that all art needs to be propaganda, while Locke held that Black art needs to adhere to established aesthetic standards, fighting for its place in the canon of so-called Western art history (cf. Du Bois, "Criteria"; Locke). To put it differently, Du Bois and Locke publicly engaged scholars, critics, and artists in a debate about whether newly institutionalized archives of Black art were, in fact, politically mobilizing archives of resistance. Drawing on this logic of archiving as artistic participation and intervention, Stuart Hall, in a somewhat Du Boisean spirit, asserts that "[t]he moment of the archive represents the end of a certain sense of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement" (89). Again, archives of resistance are not merely storehouses of images and imaginations, but creators of new forms and practices of picturing and visualization that seek recognition. They are, in this sense, engines of disturbance and, quite emphatically, reformation by de-formation.

In its most radical expression, this interventionist mode of de-formation plays out in the aesthetic of "Black grotesquerie," which Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman sees at play in the difference between "disturbed form" and "disturbing content." Abdur-Rahman writes,

> black grotesquerie marks in contemporary black cultural production the deployment of the grotesque as an expressive mode that undermines the prevailing social order by confounding its representational logics. […] The acceptance of catastrophe as the context for black being, the practice of living on in outmoded shapes, the appetite for the unbearable underside of enjoyment, and the determination to make last what has already been ruined are the signal features of black grotesquerie. (683)

Picturing, in this context, is also a mode of materializing grotesquerie to undermine, distort, and disenfranchise prevailing archives. "As an expressive practice, black grotesquerie infuses the materiality of the black body with the textuality of the art object. Rather than merely signifying excess, dread, or decay, black grotesquerie delineates an aesthetic practice of contortion, exaggeration, substitution, inversion, corruption" (683).[9]

Along these lines, the pictorial archives in the Americas are inadvertently tied to what Robert F. Reid-Pharr, co-editor of this issue, has referred to as "archives of flesh" (*Archives*). In the archives that emerge from the history and legacy of colonialism and slavery, the body is uncircumventable.[10] And this holds true both for repressive and progressive archival practices and media. Therefore, we return to the history of photography in the United States. For bell hooks, photography (and potentially also the art of graphic narrativization) is a medium to "*re-member*," which "evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of de-

[9] On the violence of dehumanization and animalization of Blackness in the history of Western science and on the ways African diasporic cultural production alters the meaning of the term "human," see Jackson.

[10] For more on the body, fragmented visuality, and the archive, see Nyong'o.

11 But not least the public murder of George Floyd in May 2020 underscored the still dominant presence of the colonizing eye that not only records the dehumanization of Black people but that desires ever-new images of such dehumanizing spectacles. Picturing is then ultimately tied to the practices and media technologies of watching and witnessing, of surveillance as much as voyeurism. In *Texte zur Kunst*, Robert F. Reid-Pharr therefore notes, "We (Americans, Germans, blacks, whites, indeed the whole of the planet) watch and rewatch George Floyd's being killed because watching black men being killed is what we always do" ("Anatomy").

12 This, of course, holds just as true for disability studies, performance theory, queer studies, feminist theory, and gender studies. See, for example, Laura Mulvey's paradigmatic 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

13 In *The Black Atlantic*, particularly in chapter 4, Paul Gilroy further complicates Du Bois's concept by arguing that "[d]ouble consciousness emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalistic in that it derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not-yet-citizens find themselves, rather than from their aspiration towards a nation state of their own. The third is diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universal-ist" (127). *See also* Blight; Fanon; Gooding-Williams, especially chapter 2; Posnock.

colonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds" (64; emphasis in original). Referring to Black individuals, families, and communities in the United States (and arguably across the Americas), hooks, much like Douglass before her, notes that, "[u]sing images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye" (64).[11]

The dualism of seeing and being seen has of course a long and extensive history in the traditions of African American, postcolonial, African, Caribbean, diasporic, and Black studies.[12] At least since Du Bois's conceptualization of "double-consciousness" as the "sense 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" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 8), that dualism has been a cornerstone of critically reflecting upon the (in)visibility, (dis)placement, and (mis)representation of Blackness.[13] The violently enforced systemic disempowerment of double consciousness, one might argue, led Du Bois to demand that Black artists (and Black audiences) make the social practice of art relate to and at the same time emerge from the political practice of propaganda. Du Bois argues that "until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human" ("Criteria of Negro Art" 104). The multi-layered history of Black art and culture across the Americas is marked by ever-growing, highly dynamic, often intersecting, and at times even competing archives of resistance that, in one way or another, institutionalize modes of picturing and imagining that resist dehumanization. A case in point is Adam Pendleton's archival project *Black Dada Reader*, in which the artist turns to Black subjectivity as a product of relations against the backdrop of a history of enslavement, subjection, and objectification. "One day there are masters and tools, and the next, only people," Pendleton writes. "No forces, just relations. Black Dada is the name I borrow for the immanent historical possibility of this transformation: *Black* for the open-ended signifier projected onto resisting objects, *Dada* for *yes, yes*, the double affirmation of their refusal" (348; emphasis in original). As such, the archives of resistance unfold in practices and cultural tradition of civil disobedience (Celikates). It is in this spirit that the following contributions have been collected in an attempt to understand visuality across the Americas in resistant archival practices.

Poetics and Practices of Picturing the Black Americas: The Contributions

The contributions in this issue intricately rely on material in existing archives while drawing on their inherent gaps, silences, and invisibilities, thereby adding to the resistant archival practices and processes themselves. The contributions thus cover a wide array of works that engage in constituting, shaping, and changing archives of resistance,

from comic books and visual albums to children's magazines and (social) media archiving practices. The emphatically resistant forms and modes of archiving discussed in this introduction and, above all, in the contributions, challenge the practice of archiving as a socially, politically, and aesthetically violent form of merely constructing hegemonic imageries, narratives, and historiographies. This issue only parenthetically focuses on visual representations and inscriptions of racism, White supremacy, and/or anti-Black violence, but instead centers its focus on self-directed and self-empowering modes of creatively resisting (structural) visual absences, aggressions, and abuse.

The issue opens with an article by Daniel Stein who argues that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther* comic book series investigates the political potentials and liabilities of colonial and postcolonial archives in and for the contemporary Black Atlantic diaspora. Stein distinguishes between archives in the storyworld and the medium of the comics themselves, and thereby argues that Coates's engagement in the world (and archiving practice) of comic book writing serves as an attempt to create alternative genealogies for the Black superhero and marks an attempt to offer new critical frameworks for rethinking the history of the genre and the legacies of Western imperialism.

Along similar lines, Nina Mickwitz focuses on a selection of contemporary U.S. comics that feature young Black female protagonists and are written and drawn by Black female creators. These comics, Mickwitz argues, demand that readers pay attention to issues of textual representation and to the social and cultural contexts of the creative industries as well, and they thus highlight questions concerning both race and gender. Against the backdrop of the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and the intersection of creation and reception, Mickwitz's discussion pays particular attention to central characters, aspects of the superhero genre, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction. She argues that the comics in question revise dominant representational repertoires and contest racialized and gendered assumptions about comics creators and their readership.

In a close reading of *Morro da Favela* (2011), a graphic novel by contributor André Diniz (see interview), Javiera Irribarren Ortiz proposes that while Maurício Hora's original photographs, which inspired Diniz's novel, represent the image of the favela to create a counter-hegemonic visual archive, Diniz's graphic novel serves as a visual remediation that reinforces Hora's artistic commitment to social contestation. The poetics and aesthetics of both registers, photography and graphic narrative, merge in Diniz's work and thus become themselves a resistant archive against the array of widely replicated and misrepresenting images of the favela in the media.

In her reading of the children's magazine *The Brownies' Book* (1920-1921), Verena Laschinger examines its strategic use of photographs to counter the demeaning depictions of Black Americans (both visually

and textually) that commonly circulated in mainstream culture of the time. Laschinger interrogates the politics and poetics of photography in *The Brownies' Book* and shows how the magazine twists the figure of the angelic child, a staple of the (White) nineteenth-century sentimental novel, idealizing the Black child as angel and thereby challenging the White hegemonic use of angel iconography.

Returning to the resistant iconography of popular culture, Raphaëlle Efoui-Delplanque looks at Beyoncé's visual albums *Black Is King* (2020) and *Lemonade* (2016) to argue that Beyoncé engages with audiovisual representation as a way of *rewriting* existing narratives of Blackness and *representing* the African diaspora and the African continent. Efoui-Delplanque claims that the albums navigate a contentious space in which feminist empowerment, sexual objectification, conservative gender roles, hyper-capitalist consumption, and the imagination of African and Afrodiasporic cultures coexist and contest each other simultaneously in order to make the individual collective, the personal political, and the disparate united in the Black diaspora as both a creative community and an addressee.

In the concluding essay of this issue, Michael Thomas explores the work of Fabrice Lubin, a psychotherapist in Chicago, and Marquise Davon, an educator in Reading, PA, who organize online events and promote media that engage with the impact of racism on professional, political, and community life. Thomas argues that Lubin's and Davon's work turns to the practice of resistant self-archiving in order to bring individuals together in communities that can potentially serve as political counterpublics. Focusing on the aesthetics of "bearing witness," these communities, Thomas claims, can interlink individual experiences and community interests on a platform of collective action.

The issue closes with an interview with comics artists and graphic narrative authors Breena Nuñez (USA / El Salvador / Guatemala), André Diniz (Brazil), and Marcelo D'Salete (Brazil). While Black and Brown experiences have long been neglected (or, worse, ridiculed and discriminated) in the medium, Nuñez, Diniz, and D'Salete explain how graphic narratives with their multimodal and transmedial language have become an important artistic space of Black resistance in recent years, a fact the authors have contributed to in the past and continue to contribute to with their own multifaceted works: autobiographical and queerfeminist comic strips (Nuñez), a graphic biography about the Brazilian photographer Maurício Hora (Diniz), and semi-fictional narratives around the history of Quilombo dos Palmares, an important center of slave resistance in colonial Brazil (D'Salete). Their individual artistic ways of picturing the Black Americas, in different formats and on different platforms—from zines to graphic novels and the webcomic—help to create counter-hegemonic visual archives of resistance that address the gaps left or harmfully intended in traditional Western culture.

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Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther* and Afrodiasporic Archives

Daniel Stein

Abstract

This article argues that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther* comic book run (2016-2021) launches a popular serial investigation of the political potentials and liabilities of colonial and postcolonial archives for the contemporary Black Atlantic diaspora. Distinguishing between archives in the storyworld ("Archives in *Black Panther*") and the comics themselves as interventions into superhero history ("*Black Panther* as Archival Agent"), the article reads Coates's foray into comic book writing as an attempt to create alternative genealogies for the Black superhero as well as a move to offer new critical frameworks for rethinking the history of the genre and reconsidering the legacies of racially sanctioned Western imperialism. The argument closes with remarks on Coates's treatment of gender in the fictional nation of Wakanda.

Key Words: Black Atlantic diaspora; colonial and digital archives; superhero comics; popular serial narrative

When it was announced in 2015 that the national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and celebrated African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates would script Marvel Comics' *Black Panther*, not only comics aficionados and superhero fans took note. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and television programs like NBC's *Meet the Press* hyped Coates's foray into comic book writing and set high expectations for the initial 12-issue run of the series, titled *A Nation under Our Feet* (2016) and illustrated by Brian Stelfreeze. Much of the discourse centered on whether Coates—whose books *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008) and *Between the World and Me* (2015) were deemed "required reading" by the late Toni Morrison (cover blurb) and whom *Rolling Stone* had classified as "the most important essayist in a generation and a writer who changed the national political

conversation about race" (Fear)—would bring the depth and scope of his nonfiction writing to the comic. Many critics wondered how Coates's views on racism in the United States would impact his treatment of the Black Panther.[1]

In a piece in *The Atlantic* that contextualized his gravitation to comics, Coates spoke of "The Return of the Black Panther" even though the character had appeared in a recent run written by Reginald Hudlin (2005-2008; 2009-2010). Hudlin had introduced the Black Panther's sister Shuri in 2005 and had extended her role in the 2009 storyline *Deadliest of the Species* to strengthen the depiction of women in the series, building on writer Christopher Priest's and artist Mark Texeira's invention of the Dora Milaje ("Adored Ones"), T'Challa's female bodyguards, in the late 1990s.[2]

More important than the notion of the Black Panther's return, however, was the connection Coates established between his superhero storytelling and his journalism:

> Despite the difference in style and practice of storytelling, my approach to comic books ultimately differs little from my approach to journalism. In both forms, I am trying to answer a question. In my work for *The Atlantic* I have […] been asking a particular question: Can a society part with, and triumph over, the very plunder that made it possible? In *Black Panther* there is a simpler question: Can a good man be a king, and would an advanced society tolerate a monarch? Research is crucial in both cases. The Black Panther I offer pulls from the archives of Marvel and the character's own long history. But it also pulls from the very real history of society—from the pre-colonial era of Africa, the peasant rebellions that wracked Europe toward the end of the Middle Ages, the American Civil War, the Arab Spring, and the rise of ISIS. ("The Return")

This passage introduces four ideas that anchor my analysis of Coates's *Black Panther* run, which spans more than three dozen issues, was collected in eight trade paperbacks, and generated two spin-offs: *World of Wakanda* (with Roxane Gay, 2017) and *Black Panther & the Crew* (with Yona Harvey, 2017).[3] First is the claim that his comic book writing is driven by a journalistic ethos and extensive research on the connections between contemporary society and the past. *Black Panther* comes off as fiction rooted in history, as a serial treatment of the character cognizant of the political baggage with which any serious engagement with colonialism and imperialist ventures in Africa must contend. Second, by juxtaposing journalistic inquiry—"Can a society part with, and triumph over, the very plunder that made it possible?"—with the precept of the comic—"Can a good man be a king, and would an advanced society tolerate a monarch?"—Coates intimates that his *Black Panther* is informed equally by extensive research and genre-specific requirements. Coates infuses genre elements like spectacular fight scenes into a story about the struggles of Wakanda, the fictional African country and ostensible Afrofuturist utopia ruled by King T'Challa, the current Black Panther,

[1] The novel *The Water Dancer* (2019) was published after the initial media hype around the *Black Panther* series but followed the publicity garnered by Ryan Coogler's blockbuster movie. On Black superheroes and popular culture, see Nama.

[2] On Shuri and the Dora Milaje as intersectional (Black, female, queer) figures, see FitzMaurice.

[3] The paperbacks group Coates's run into three story arcs: *A Nation under Our Feet* (Books 1 to 3), *Avengers of the New World* (Books 4 and 5), *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* (Books 6 to 8).

which faces internal unrest while transitioning from a monarchy to a democratic republic.[4] Third, while he acknowledges the affordances and the limitations of superhero comics when he mentions "the character's own long history," Coates advocates a look beyond fantastic genre conceits at the "very real history of society," including a transnational interest in Africa, Europe, the United States, and the Arab world. Fourth, he identifies "the archives of Marvel" as the source of his re-imagination of the character.

Although not fully articulated in the above passage, Coates's take on the Black Panther is invested in the idea of a global Black diaspora whose genesis and present condition are connected to the archive.[5] Coates utilizes the suggestiveness of the archive as a lens through which ongoing superhero narratives may reflect on their propagation of imperial fantasies and myths of national exceptionalism. Moreover, his version of the character and its evolving storyworld participate in the construction of what Teju Cole has called "global diasporic blackness" and defined as "that colonial hangover […] added to […] the American experiences of slavery, slave rebellion, Jim Crow, and contemporary racism, as well as the connective tissue that bound the Black Atlantic into a single territory of pain."[6]

I argue in this essay that Coates, in conjunction with his illustrators, uses the fictional storyworld of *Black Panther* to interrogate postcolonial territories of pain encapsulated in and beyond archives. He does this in terms of narrative content, but he also launches the comic itself as an intervention into the history of superhero comics, presenting a pop-cultural "critical fabulation" and a "critical reading of the archive that mines the figurative dimensions of history" (Hartman 11).[7] Advancing a "popular intellectual critique" and juxtaposing the "potentially conflicting obligations of public intellectual, prominent black journalist, political and phenomenological philosopher, and avid comics fan" (Boonin-Vail 135, 137), Coates's *Black Panther* is a significant, though not altogether unproblematic, contribution to what Arjun Appadurai calls the digitally enhanced "diasporic public sphere" (22). Appadurai understands this public sphere as "a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities" (17), but if we take Ryan Coogler's massively popular and globally resonant *Black Panther* film (2018) as a cinematic indicator, we can see that this sphere is also shaped by corporate franchises acting as memory-making institutions.[8]

Notes on Diasporic Archives

According to Diana Taylor, we are living in the "era of the archive" ("Save" 2), a digitized world "obsessed with archives—as metaphor, as place, as system, and as logic of knowledge production, transmission, and preservation" (4). Coates's *Black Panther* shares this obsession, but it does so within the parameters of the superhero genre, balancing sto-

[4] Boonin-Vail contrasts the narrative captions (white letters over black background) that represent T'Challa's "regrets, anxieties, and political considerations" with the comics' intense physical action (141). On *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturist text, see Chambliss; on Afrofuturism in digital times, see Anderson and Jones.

[5] On archival theory, see Stein, "What's in an Archive?" On archives in graphic narrative, see Ahmed and Crucifix's *Comics Memory*; Stein, "Der Comic"; and Stein, *Authorizing* (ch. 4).

[6] Martin Lüthe observes a danger of essentializing the Black Atlantic almost thirty years after Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and describes a New Black Atlantic with increasing immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa. He cites a *New York Times* report from 2005 according to which "more Africans have arrived in the US since 1990 than during the entire period of the transatlantic slave trade" (110).

[7] For Hartman, critical fabulation "advance[s] a series of speculative arguments and exploit[s] the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research" (11).

[8] Appadurai observes "[t]he creation of documents and their aggregation into archives [... as] part of everyday life outside the purview of the state. The personal diary, the family photo album, the community museum, the libraries of individuals are all examples of popular archives" (16).

rytelling conventions with an inquiry into the functions of archives for the Black diaspora. In fact, *Black Panther* imagines two kinds of archives and foregrounds their impact on life in the fictional African nation of Wakanda: an oral archive akin to what Taylor calls an "embodied repertoire" (*Archive* 178), described in the comic as "the histories before there was history" (Coates et al, Book 5), and a digitally enhanced archive that cements the power of an intergalactic empire in Books 6 to 8.

Taylor further maintains that the "archive is simultaneously an authorized place (the physical or digital site housing collections), a thing / object (or collection of things—the historical records and unique or representative objects marked for inclusion), and a practice (the logic of selection, organization, access, and preservation over time that deems certain objects 'archivable')" ("Save" 4). *Black Panther* undermines the notion of the archive as an authorized place by inventing a mythical space called the Djalia, which holds all of Wakandan history, including what has not been officially recorded. Later in the narrative, the archive becomes a concrete location, a storage facility where the intergalactic empire data-mines memories swiped from the subjugated population. This second archive is an actual place the slave rebels must find to restore the memories to their owners. In both cases, we confront not archival "objects" but displaced memories, individual and collective. Coates is thus concerned with contested forms of cultural memory and attempts to account for Black diasporic history. He "posit[s] and imagin[es] pasts that exceed material documentation" (Walters 4), "setting in motion the possibility behind the archive's limits" (5).

Moreover, Aleida Assmann usefully distinguishes between archival *messages*, understood as "texts and monuments [...] addressed to posterity," and archival *traces*, which bear "no similar address" ("Canon" 98-99). As Saidiya Hartman has argued, archival records of the African diaspora bear only scattered traces of the enslaved rather than consciously implemented messages (2). Gabriella Giannachi therefore maintains that "diasporic archives, like colonial archives, constitute records of uncertainty and loss. They are ontologically and epistemologically fragile" (100). Accordingly, "[w]hat remains of an archive, any archive, but in particular a diasporic archive, is often the result of destruction or plundering caused by conflict" (98). The resulting gap between the traces of the enslaved and the messages of the enslavers has motivated diasporic writers and artists to imagine a more inclusive history, filling in archival gaps through fictional means.[9] "What is not there also provokes: by exceeding historical awareness and intelligibility, it forces us to acknowledge the archive's limits," Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor conclude. Yet, as Ann Laura Stoler notes, even the colonizers' messages represent "records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world" (4). These "epistemic uncertainties repeatedly unsettled the imperial conceit that all was in order" (1). In Coates's *Black Panther*, they

9 Walters speaks of "new imaginings which confront the gaps, spaces, and the master's pinning discourse by refusing to see this archive as finite or definitive" (5). Hartman cautions: "The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none" (8).

provide the impetus for the rebellion of the enslaved, prompting an unlikely topic for a superhero comic.

If (colonial) archives produce epistemic uncertainties, they also function "as engines of circulation, as archival acts or practices that both mobilize different media and are mobilized by them. Instead of valuing notions of fixity, authenticity, and legitimacy," Hirsch and Taylor write, "we [must] look at the archive as the site of potentiality, provisionality, and contingency," as "a haunting provocation" and a "fertile ground for artists and performers who use and at the same time critique its construction."[10] Thus, when diasporic writers turn to history, they often "posit alternate narratives of agency, humanity, and empowerment, as a supplement to the meager traces recorded in the archives of the slave trader, colonizer, or court room," as Wendy W. Walters explains. Indeed, they tend to veer back and forth "between the data of the archive […] and the aspirational imaginings of black historical literature," tapping into an "aspirational register" that considers "not just 'what happened' or 'what was said to have happened,' but rather 'what may have happened'" (1). In doing so, they strain to "unmoor […] the concept of archive from its stubborn attachment to national narratives" (3) and indicate "the instability of the archive's truth claim to show how it is culturally constructed and open to hermeneutics" (4). We can see this move from the national to the transnational in Coates's *Black Panther* as we witness Wakanda's geopolitical turmoil in the first five books and follow the intergalactic empire in Books 6 to 8 as it exerts archival control to subdue the enslaved population and extend its political reach.

Finally, our notion of archives should also include the peculiarities of popular archives and the popular archiving practices central to comics like *Black Panther*. While the slave rebels in the later segments of the series seek to (re-)create popular archives along the lines of Appadurai's records of "everyday life outside the purview of the state" (16), Coates's *Black Panther* also aligns with Abigail De Kosnik's *rogue archives* where "[m]edia users [in the digital era] have seized hold of all of mass culture *as an archive*, an enormous repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which they can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations, their alternatives to or customizations of the sources" (4; emphasis in original). De Kosnik continues: "Engagement with cultural memory is […] not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts, it also now often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making" (4). The 60-plus cover variants reprinted in the trade paperbacks of Coates's *Black Panther*, for instance, incorporate and thereby sanction the kinds of rogue visual experimentation we know from fan art.[11] If, as De Kosnik suggests, "each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated—a starting point or springboard for receivers' creativity" (4), we can see a semantic compatibility with one of Coates's

10 Cf. Koh: "archives are not sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production; not recorded moments of history but monuments of states, colonies and empires" (385).

11 See also Labarre's perceptive analysis of "producing fans" in comics (ch. 7).

main political concepts ("plunder") and recognize *Black Panther* as an engine of circulation in this reconfigured production cycle: a sort of meta-narrative about archival plunder that plunders popular archival practices.

Based on these observations, I distinguish between archives in the storyworld—archives in *Black Panther*—and the comics as interventions into (superhero) history—*Black Panther* as archival agent. This distinction adds a third facet to an archival heuristic I have proposed elsewhere between comics *in* archives (research libraries, private collections) and comics *as* archives (comics acting as archiving institutions) (see Stein, "Comics") and grounds my investigation of the vexed relationship between comic book archives and Afrodiasporic agencies.

Archives in *Black Panther*

Since its inception in the mid-1960s, Wakanda had been a fictional African kingdom whose ownership of the magical metal vibranium made it "the most technologically advanced society on the globe" (Book 1).[12] But in Coates's run, King T'Challa, ruler of Wakanda and bearer of the Black Panther suit, returns home from a sojourn abroad to find his sister Queen Shuri murdered and his country in disarray. T'Challa and his supporters face internal threats from the rebel group "The People," led by Tetu and Zenzi, and external attacks, as villains like Ulysses Klaue (Klaw) set their sights on the nation's resources.[13] In this situation, T'Challa clings to the dream of Wakanda as a virtuous monarchy spearheaded by a beloved leader and blessed with a people united by their allegiance to the king. Yet, already early on, he is told that "power lies not in what a king does, but in what his subjects believe he might do," and he concedes that "what the people know not is the true power of kings" (Book 1). Searching guidance from the ancestors in the spirit world, he is pressured by previous Black Panthers to squash the rebellion and reinforce his rule.[14] But T'Challa favors advice from his sister Shuri, who exists in "a petrified state known as The Living Death" (Book 3) and whose "mind travels to the Djalia, a plane of Wakanda's collective past, present, and future," where she is "guided by a griot spirit who has taken the visual form of [her mother] Ramonda" (Book 1).

The Djalia is "the plane of Wakandan memory" (Book 1), a "metaphysical oasis where Wakandan spirits comingle in a radically disembodied and deterritorialized space that is part afterlife and part archive" (Boonin-Vail 143). This is where T'Challa, through Shuri, seeks to reconstruct the country's history beyond written records: "All of it is here. All of the triumph and tragedy of your people," the griot, as a self-described "caretaker of all our histories" (Book 1), promises Shuri. The Djalia contains memories beyond the official archive and thus affords "an Africanist or black world perspective" (Gikandi 86). As such, it challenges what Simon Gikandi describes as "this archive without

12 Bibi Burger and Laura Engels reference Coates's nonfiction work to suggest that the "fictional African country of Wakanda functions as a metaphorical Mecca." Coates introduces the notion of Howard University as the Mecca and an "incredible cosmopolis of blackness" in *The Beautiful Struggle* (152), calling it "the crossroads of the black diaspora" in *Between the World and Me* (40).

13 On the political and philosophical conflicts the comic negotiates through its character constellation and that include Zenzi's populism, the "Midnight Angels' radical feminism and the philosopher Changamire's pacifist anti-monarchism" (3), see Burger and Engels, who read the comic's "conflicting ideological positions [as] metaphors for real world political views" (1).

14 Cf. Book 1: "I feel blinded by the past"; "I keep seeing ancestors."

African voices, without African documents, without an African historical a priori" (86).

Seeking national unity, Shuri must access "the power of memory" (Book 1) through the forgotten histories of Wakanda. In Book 2, the griot narrates these histories, speaking of "place[s] now lost to your written histories, though not lost to the griot." Confronted with Shuri's impertinent question, "What is the point of the babble?," the griot responds: "The point is power, girl. […] Either you are a nation, or you are nothing." Here, the archive is tied to the dream of a nation-state that would stabilize a monarch struggling to reconcile the demands of the rebels ("No one man," they proclaim by the second issue) with the urge to solidify his power. Thus, Wakanda's problem is not colonization, as it has never been colonized due to its wealth and technological advancement. It is the false belief in its own grandeur. "We believed our own myths," Shuri, now back among the living, tells T'Challa in Book 3. "This was our first mistake. If you can't see a world clearly, then you have no hope of mastering it."

Black Panther illustrates the need to search beyond the national archive, to question the myths of Wakanda as an exceptional nation. In Book 3, T'Challa refutes the philosopher Changamire's doubtful rejoinder that "we were supposed to be exceptional" by insisting that "Wakanda *is* exceptional" (emphasis in original).[15] In Book 4, Shuri meets with Eden Fesi, a friend and former member of the Avengers, at the Wakandan Royal Library, where he is skimming through history books to learn more about the snake-men that are attacking the country. When he tells Shuri that these "snake-men resemble creatures from an obscure translation" of an old saga, she already knows what he is about to tell her. "Old stories have, of late, become a hobby of mine," she confesses. "There is the history of this country—the one you find in books like these—and then there is something older. The story of the land and its peoples long before they took the name 'Wakanda.'" Shuri imagines herself as "Aja-Adanna, the ancient future, bearer of a past so deep it's not even the past. The 'deep past' is all around us, guiding events that we believe to be manifestations of our will." If Wakanda's recorded history is the canon that contracts and limits cultural memory (Assmann, "Canon" 102), Shuri views the past as an archive that expands knowledge of the past, present, and future of the country. In Book 5, the Djalia appears as "memory incarnate"; while it contains "the histories before there was history" and offers Shuri knowledge about "Wakanda before its name," it teaches her and T'Challa a powerful lesson: "Did you truly believe that a great nation could be built without another one underfoot? […] Every man is the hero of his own story, the champion of his own chosen myth."

Devising the Djalia and proposing the existence of a deep past, both of which cannot save Wakanda from intrusion and fail to cement T'Challa's power, Coates critiques what Assmann conceptualizes as the

15 In *Between the World and Me*, Coates counters notions of American exceptionalism with a nod to Hannah Arendt, arguing that the country's "banality of violence can never excuse America, because America […] believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation to *ever* exist […]. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error" (8).

historical archive as opposed to the political archive.[16] Where "political archives function as an important tool for power, historical archives store information which is no longer of immediate use" ("Canon" 103). Historical archives are

> part of the passive dimension of cultural memory, […] the knowledge that is stored in the archive is inert. It is stored and potentially available, but it is not interpreted. […] The archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage […]. It stores materials in the intermediary stage of "no longer" and "not yet," deprived of their old existence and waiting for a new one. (103)

As the first five *Black Panther* books indicate, Wakanda's historical archive must neither be a physical storage space nor an actual place where the past remains passive. Instead, the comic devises an imaginary archival space that contradicts colonial histories of Africa and complicates Wakanda's official history.

In Coates's version of the Black Panther, the historical archive is always already political. Political archives, Assmann writes, "serve […] the ruling class with the necessary information to build up provisions for the future through stockpiling. They also serve […] as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power and to discipline the population" ("Canon" 102). Wakanda's royal rulers legitimize their power and discipline the population through knowledge of the deep past provided by the Djalia, which is Coates's popular version of the *arkhé*, the archive's Greek roots as "beginning" and "government" (Assmann, *Cultural* 327) or, as Jacques Derrida writes in "Archive Fever," "commencement" and "commandment" (9). If the archive is "a place where things begin, where power originates," as Carolyn Steedman suggests (1), the Djalia emerges as Coates's critically fabulated answer to Gikandi's question "How does one commence or command without agency or power?" (86).

A more explicitly political archive appears in *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* arc in Books 6 to 8. Here, the action transitions to a five-galaxy-spanning empire, a former space colony that was founded by a contingent of Wakandans who left earth 2000 years prior to the narrative present and turned self-defense into conquest and mass enslavement. This story begins in Book 6 with an act of rebellion by an enslaved man (later revealed to be T'Challa, without most of his memories but yearning to go home and retrieve his old life) who rises up against an overseer of the empire in a fight reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's confrontation with slave breaker Edward Covey. What starts as an individual act of resistance soon becomes a sci-fi version of a slave insurrection by a group of maroons. Recalling the uprooting of the enslaved during and after the Middle Passage, the enslaved on planet Gorée (after Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar, location of the famous museum and memorial *Maison des Esclaves* and the Door of No Return), who are forced to extract vibranium from the mines to empower the empire, face

16 Cf. also: "[Shuri] had her griot power—the entire history of Wakanda at her disposal. It was not enough." In Book 3, Shuri exclaims about Wakanda's capital: "The golden city must not fall." But T'Challa soon speaks of "the diaspora of the golden city."

a devastating future: "They have stolen your name, your culture, your God. Do not let them steal your mind," one of the enslaved tells the rebel, who is haunted by fading visions of his past (Book 6).

Pressed by the leader of the maroons (N'Yami) about his incentive for joining the rebellion, the rebel expresses a diasporic desire for a homeland—"I fight to get back home" (Book 6)—even though he can barely remember this home and does not even know his name. N'Yami responds: "We are the nameless, my son. Orphans of the cosmos. Flotsam of the empire. But now is the hour of our restoration. Our handles are taken from the legends of our past. So that we, marooned in the empire, are nameless no more. And to you I give the name of a man who was born a king and died a hero. Arise T'Challa." From the traces of the past, the scraps in the archive, N'Yami and her followers construct a revolutionary message, as T'Challa learns more about the empire's archives from fellow maroon fighter Nakia. When the Askari, described in the paratext as "both the police force of the Empire and the arm of the Wakandan slave trade,"

> steal memories, they store them in the imperial archive. Every bit of that archive is then mined and researched [… f]or anything unknown to them— anything. Thoughts, ideas, emotions, stories, methods, half-formed notions. All of it is appropriated for their interests. […] Your memories are knowledge. And the Empire doesn't destroy knowledge … … they plunder it. […] It is sickening. The Empire speaks of the grandeur of its civilization. And it is grand. But it is also stolen. (Book 6)

These statements exemplify Coates's assessment of American history, especially the disenfranchisement and dehumanization of the enslaved, and of Western colonialism as large-scale theft rationalized as the extension of civilization to the allegedly uncivilized. In Book 7, M'Baku, another ally, specifies the archive's foundational force for the empire:

> Like all Empires, the Empire of Wakanda is counterfeit. It is a Confederacy of villains who've elevated criminality to galactic law. The Empire creates nothing. It enlightens no one. Because, as the great Changamire taught, "Empires do not enlighten, they plunder." […] The font of the Empire's great power is the archive—its vast collection of knowledge. All of it plundered from the memories of the millions they've enslaved. […] It is the archive that gave the Empire its culture and technology. From the Rigellians, the Empire acquired the vast knowledge of the stars. From the Teku-Maza, they pilfered literature and song. From the Kronan, they learned the true power of vibranium—life-blood of the Empire. From the Shadow People, they stole knowledge of governance and hierarchy.

The Enlightenment emerges here as the enabling philosophy to a system of mass enslavement and mass plundering.[17] Western civilization, and especially the United States (note the allusion to the Southern Confederacy and also how the powers of vibranium recall the antebellum cotton economy), are unmasked as a gigantic fraud: a false claim to cultural and technological superiority derived from knowledge of the colonized that

[17] Plunder is a central term for Coates. *Between the World and Me* finds "plunder everywhere around us" (21), warning: "Beware the plunderer!" (87-88). *We Were Eight Years in Power* asserts: "America is literally unimaginable without plundered labor shackled to plundered land, without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship, without the culture crafted by the plundered, and without that culture itself being plundered" (85).

is stolen, stored in the archive, and then used against the disempowered, disenfranchised, and disinherited. "Do you know what it is to be haunted?," T'Challa asks in Book 6 and connects the filling of the imperial archive with the mind-swiped memories of the enslaved and the plundered knowledge of their people with the erasure of a Black future: "The Empire doesn't just steal our past, they steal our futures. How can we move forward when we do not know our names? Who we are? Who we love? Even as I have escaped, I am captured, held fast by these questions. Who am I? What promises have I made? And to whom? How can I move forward, knowing not what I am leaving behind?" The enslaved are robbed of their memories, but they refuse to be defined by this theft. As a general of the empire tells the rebels in Book 7: "you've lived three lives—the conquered, the slave, and now the maroon. And all of those lives existed outside the largesse of the Empire." Walters therefore maintains: "Where the archive records people as slave, coolie, and arsonist," diasporic writers "set these languages mobile, aspirational, and open to the subjunctive asking: 'what if they were rebel, lover, leader?'" (5). Writers like Coates,

> posit stowaways, underground resistance leaders, and literate rebels who would not likely appear in the records of the plantation owner, slave ship captain, or court reporter. Or where they do appear, misnamed as criminal, coolie, or hashmark, a cipher in the history of the nation-state, creative writers teach us to look anew and see the lives of everyday people who resisted the dominant order in multiple, often subtle, perhaps unrecorded ways. (6)

For the rebels in the storyworld, such imaginative archival interventions are, however, hardly possible. For them, as M'Baku exclaims in Book 7, the aim is "to neutralize the archive. The Empire evolves too fast for us to fight, because the archive is alive. It does not just hold knowledge. It analyzes and dissects it. Searching for patterns. For new ways to conquer. New ways to enslave." While this new type of archive evokes a techno-dystopia where powerful institutions monitor, control, and exploit the population, M'Baku refuses to give up: "We are going to avenge its victims, and make them whole. Because the Empire didn't simply steal our technology and culture—they stole our lives."

Black Panther as Archival Agent

I have already cited Hirsch and Taylor's understanding of archives as "engines of circulation" and De Kosnik's observations on rogue archives in the digital era. I now want to build on these ideas by moving away from storyworld depictions of archives to *Black Panther*'s role as an archival agent in and beyond superhero comics.

As a current (re-)iteration of an older Marvel property, Coates's *Black Panther* recalls Stoler's characterization of "colonial archives [as] an arsenal of sorts that were reactivated to suit new governing strategies" (3). This reactivation includes Marvel's cultivation of a "corporate

narrative memory" that uses the property as "a creative and commercial resource," as Jean-Matthieu Méon writes about the publisher's ongoing "memory management" (190, 194, 195). The paperback collections amplify the fact that Coates and Stelfreeze revise the original Black Panther and critically interact with the superhero's history. The reprints of the earliest Black Panther stories in the appendices of Books 1 and 2 foreground the serial continuities and dissonances between Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's character and Coates and Stelfreeze's updated version, which is less beholden to (but not entirely free from) stereotypes of Africa and rethinks the genre's troubled gender depictions by affording major roles to female characters (Shuri, Ramonda, Ororo Munroe, the Dora Milaje). In the first appearance of Lee and Kirby's Black Panther, The Thing (Ben Grimm) described the superhero as "some refugee from a *Tarzan* movie," recognizing the comic's indebtedness to popular representations of Blackness and African otherness—to "the pop culture of plunderers," as Coates writes in *We Were Eight Years in Power* (112)—but also registering the character's deviation from such stereotypes as a master scientist and superior fighter who gives the Fantastic Four a run for their money.[18]

If the backlog of these and other superhero stories is conceptualized as an archive, Coates's *Black Panther* intervenes in the messages this archive stores for posterity by retroactively imbuing it with previously marginalized content, annotating Marvel's decision to make their first Black superhero African in order to avoid racial tensions with a much more heavily politicized commentary on past and present forms of anti-Black violence and racist oppression. Coates's version also pinpoints a reprehensible tendency to feature Black superheroes in secondary roles, represented in Book 4 through the character of Dr. Eliot Augustus Franklin / Thunderball, who complains about being denigrated as "the black Bruce Banner." What's more, the "Black Panther Chronology" at the end of Book 1 maps the history of the character's comic book appearances and thus turns the colonial practice of mapping (narrative) territory into a call to critically investigate—or creatively remap—superhero history. Book 5 also revives one of Marvel's more traditional archival mechanisms, the editorial footnote, creating a referential system for readers to navigate their way to earlier stories deemed relevant for the narrative present.

Moreover, underscoring De Kosnik's assertion that popular "[e]ngagement with cultural memory is […] not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts [… but] often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making" (4), *Black Panther* draws on written and visual archives that are not germane to comics. This includes works by Frederick Douglass (T'Challa fighting an overseer), Henri Dumas (the poem "Rootsong" in issue #3 of the series; see also Coates, "Wakanda"), W.E.B. DuBois (Book 2: "Two men are forever warring within me"), Audre Lorde (the paraphrased es-

18 Several essays in Darowski's *The Ages of the Black Panther* interrogate the politics behind Lee and Kirby's version of the character. See also Lund.

say title "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Book 3), Ralph Ellison (a rebel leader is called Ras the Exhorter), and Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975) in Book 3. Coates even has philosopher Changamire reformulate Morgan's argument from an Afrodiasporic perspective: "That book chronicles the attempt to raise an entire race of kings. And every year thousands of them were born and charged with keeping thousands more underfoot." These intertextual references serve as archival finding aids, but they also offer an intellectual framework—a customization of the comic book sources that anticipates and sanctions the creative practices of De Kosnik's rogue archivists—that readers may explore to enrich their understanding of the narrative's historical, political, and literary implications.

In addition, visual allusions mark the comic's awareness of the larger archive of politicized imagery, counting on readers capable of connecting the dots. One example is a splash panel in Book 1 that evokes media images of a Saddam Hussein statue being torn down by U.S. soldiers during the invasion of Iraq, conjuring up the disastrous post-9/11 nation-building endeavors of the Bush Administration. A more recent reference is the first cover variant at the beginning of Book 1: Alex Ross's Black Panther in mid-air surrounded by gun-toting policemen. This nod to the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests that followed in the wake of Michael Brown's murder and the Ferguson riots sets the tone for the story, connecting the colonial past with contemporary grievances and bringing police brutality into the comic book canon.[19] Here, the comic incorporates creative applications and adaptations of its central imagery to ongoing political conflicts instead of outsourcing this practice to the fans.

Finally, the paperback collections include paratextual "archive stories" (Antoinette Burton) about the making of the series. These include a "Behind the Scenes" feature with Brian Stelfreeze; a "Process and Development" section; an interview with Coates and Ryan Coogler titled "Down with the King"; and a "How to Draw Black Panther in Six Easy Steps" exercise enticing readers to try their hands at comic art. If contemporary media users treat popular culture as a "repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which they can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations" (De Kosnik 4), *Black Panther* does exactly that. All eight paperbacks include variant cover galleries that disperse the iconography of the Black Panther across graphic styles, propagating a sense of aesthetic multiplicity that no longer insists on the sanctity of an original source text but encourages adaptation and revision as integral elements of genre evolution—without, however, completely abandoning corporate control and forfeiting the commercial potential in superhero franchising.

19 Other superhero comics also address police shootings. One particularly noteworthy example is Scott Snyder and Brian Azzarello's "A Simple Case" from Batman #44 (Sept. 2015). For a close reading of this story and its politicized reception, see Stein, "Conflicting."

Conclusions: Complicating the Gaze

When the news that Coates would script the *Black Panther* broke, George Gene Gustines wrote in the *New York Times*: "Ta-Nehisi Coates can be identified in many ways: as a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, as an author and […] nominee for the National Book Award's nonfiction prize. But Mr. Coates also has a not-so-secret identity, as evidenced by some of his *Atlantic* blog posts and his Twitter feed: Marvel Comics superfan." That superfans write superhero comics is nothing new, as generations of writers and artists have self-identified as fans to authorize their versions of particular characters or series (Stein, *Authorizing* 4-5). But Gustines highlights a tension that is worth further exploration. I have already cited Eli Boonin-Vail's point that Coates uses *Black Panther* to amplify his "popular intellectual critique" (135), and I also recognize Julian Chambliss's claim that "we can see [that] Coates' approach is informed by ideological frameworks growing from Critical Race Theory […] and Black Feminist Theory" (210). But I also share Hollie FitzMaurice's conflicted assessment of the representation of women in *Black Panther* based on a critical reading of Hudlin's *Deadliest of the Species* arc but also applicable to Coates's run, albeit to a much lesser degree.[20] Coates certainly presents a broad range of strong female figures, including a queer romance between the renegades Ayo and Aneka, explored at length in the *World of Wakanda* spin-off. Moreover, some of the resistance against Wakanda's "totalitarian monarchism" (Burger and Engels 16-17) is formed as a critique of patriarchy. "No man should have that much power," Ayo justifies the rebellious actions of the Midnight Angels, while Aneka makes the case for women's liberation in Book 2: "Once we were bred by men solely to give our bodies to other men. We have seen how the woman becomes the enslaved. Let us now show them how the enslaved becomes a legend."[21] In Coates's Wakanda, however, Shuri is "an alternately disembodied or suprabodied savior of the nation in comparison with her deeply embodied brother," as Boonin-Vail overserves (146). Roaming the Djalia in search of memories, she is first denied a physical existence and then becomes a superheroine whose corporeal depiction, like that of other female characters (especially Storm), does not completely abandon the generic preset, even though her ability to turn to stone and become unbreakable (first shown in Book 2) serves as an apt metaphor for shielding female bodies in the public sphere. Moreover, the depiction of Aneka and Ayo's same-sex intimacy is not entirely beyond the purview of the genre's formative voyeurism, while rebel leader Zenzi is occasionally eroticized, such as when her cloak exposes her midriff and the lower parts of her breasts in Book 2.[22] Coates's "popular black feminist project" (Boonin-Vail 146) is thus hampered at least to some extent by the weight of comic book tradition, with its tendency to subject female figures to a (White) male gaze.[23]

20 Cole's critique of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* film—"Why are monarchies the narrative default? Can we dream beyond royalty?"—is also relevant, even though Coates sets Wakanda on an unprecedented course toward democracy. See also Rebecca Wanzo's take on these issues in her recent book on racial caricature and the politics of belonging.

21 These words recall the famous chiasm from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (47).

22 See Deborah E. Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence* for a critique of female Black comic book characters as stereotypically gendered "signs" of Africa. The visual depictions of these characters are technically not Coates's, but those of his illustrators. Despite being the writer for the series, Coates would not have been totally independent in overseeing all aesthetic choices. A more elaborate analysis of the visuals would have to consider the roles of the artists as well as those of editor Wil Moss and executive editor Tom Brevoort.

23 For an analysis of how recent Black female creators resist and revision this tradition, see Nina Mickwitz's article in this issue.

In an interview before the release of *World of Wakanda*, Roxane Gay confronted Coates with the male-centric worldview of his nonfiction writing. Coates largely agreed with her critique but paid homage to authors like Isabel Wilkerson, Toni Morrison, Thavolia Glymph, Kidada Williams, Paula Giddings, and Natasha Trethewey ("The Charge to Be Fair"). In *Between the World and Me*, he also acknowledged "that all are not equally robbed of their bodies, that the bodies of women are set out for pillage in ways I could never truly know" (65). It is true, too, that the oppression and exploitation of women is repeatedly addressed in the comics. For instance, one of the elder women leaders of the Midnight Angels confronts Tetu with the brutal acts of his soldiers: "A revolution in Wakanda that overlooks half of the country is no revolution at all" (Book 3). This, then, is where Coates's version of the *Black Panther* must do its cultural work. By claiming a heightened degree of intellectual sophistication through its author's notoriety and the many intertextual references to his nonfiction work, and by associating the storytelling with the journalistic search for historical truths, the comic opens itself up to the kind of gendered critique offered by Gay. Part of this work is the inclusion of female authors and perspectives, not only in spin-off series like *World of Wakanda* and *Black Panther & the Crew* (co-written by Yona Harvey), but also in works like Nnedi Okorafor's *Black Panther: Long Live the King* and her *Shuri* series.[24]

By suggesting that archives are continually constructed and contested and that they may even go rogue, becoming unhinged from what used to be the colonizing efforts of the culture industry to maintain control over their properties and police their backstories, Coates's *Black Panther* makes significant advances in decolonizing the comic book superhero as a less White, less hegemonic, and less patriarchal figure.[25] If we read superhero comics as an evolving serial archive of fictional storytelling with real-world consequences, the archival "contact zone" (Burton 9) would be the space in which creators and readers interact. Traditionally, this would have been the letter columns and fanzines, but since the arrival of online communication, discussion boards, forums, blogs, wikis, and websites have taken over this function.[26] But perhaps we can also think of comics like *Black Panther* themselves as archival agents that draw both their creators and their readers into a globally accessible contact zone in which archives are continually mobilized to proffer new perspectives on the global imaginaries of diasporic Blackness.

24 On the feminist aesthetics of the Black Atlantic diaspora, see Pinto. We can also situate Coates's larger comics oeuvre—he has also written *Captain America*—and his nonfiction writing in what Ashe and Saal describe as the "post-soul or post-black" era, associated with "recent African American cultural productions [...] that [...] partake in a larger poetics of literary and visual narratives of slavery marking the circum-Atlantic world" (5). See also Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez.

25 Chambliss discerns "the decolonization of *Black Panther*" (204). On the Whiteness of the superhero, see Guynes and Lund.

26 It is no coincidence that *Black Panther* revolves around diasporic archives at a time when "digitization transforms slavery's status as a particular—even peculiar—object of knowledge within and beyond literary studies" (Rusert 268).

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Graphic Agency: The Powers of Heroines

Nina Mickwitz

Abstract

This article considers a selection of contemporary U.S. comics featuring young female Black protagonists, written and drawn by Black female creators, and the particular resources for fandom extended by this combination. Taken as a loose grouping, these comics demand attention to issues of textual representation and the creative industries contexts alike, and highlight questions pertaining to both race and gender. Framed by the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and located in a broader popular cultural context, including the 2018 blockbuster movie release of *Black Panther*, the discussion adopts a tri-part approach. First, it will involve attention to the central characters, bringing into view transpacific popular culture influences, certain aspects of the superhero genre, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction. Following these textual concerns, attention turns to creators and, after that, to considerations related to readerships and reception. The article posits that these comics perform a re-visioning that challenges dominant representational repertoires. Moreover, they contest entrenched racialized and gendered assumptions regarding comics creators and readerships.

Key Words: comics heroines; Black girl magic; creators; fandoms; cultural imaginaries

Introduction

While Marvel and DC respond to a demand for increased diversity in multiverses historically dominated by White male power fantasies, a distinct category of heroic tales is asserting its presence in North American comics. Brought to life by female Black comics creators, mostly as independent projects, the protagonists featured often boast special powers that enable them to transform and/or fly and transcend dimensions as they engage in epic battles. In other words, their embodiment of magic fulfills reader expectations of superhero comics and fantasy genres

alike. The young heroines in these narratives fundamentally challenge conventions by which Black women have been relegated to supporting roles, fetishized, or outright excluded in comics. Approached as a loose grouping, these works highlight questions pertaining to both race and gender and demand attention to issues of textual representation and the creative industries contexts alike. In short, "representation" will here refer not just to textual properties but also the conditions and contexts of their production.

According to Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales, the "most prominent approach [to Blackness in the comics industry] has been the textual exploration of race as represented in comic books" (65-66; see also Singer 107-19). Jeffrey A. Brown's 2001 *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* instead offers attention to both publishing enterprises and fandom, yet implicitly frames comics as a space that is particularly masculine. Aimed at a wider readership, the seminal anthology *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics Art and Culture* (2010) and its follow-up *Black Comix Returns* (2018), both edited by John Jennings and Damien Duffy, celebrate independent Black comics production in the United States. Separated by less than a decade, the space afforded to women creators significantly increased in the 2018 collection compared to its 2010 counterpart.[1] Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Black women working in comics is a recent development. Deborah E. Whaley's 2016 *Black Women in Sequence* surveys contributions of Black female creators to comics cultures in the United States and highlights a heritage too often omitted or minimally accounted for in comics histories elsewhere. Whaley's discussion of contemporary work by Black American comics artists is, moreover, a crucial touchstone for what follows.

My aim here is to consider contemporary Black female comics protagonists written and drawn by Black female comics creators, and the particular resources for fandom this combination extends. The article's tri-part approach (characters, creators, fandom) is framed by the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and located in a broader popular cultural context that includes the 2018 blockbuster movie release of *Black Panther*. Connections with the superhero genre, transpacific popular culture influences, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction, respectively, will be set out in due course.

The creators whose work is examined in this article comprise both artists and writers, all of whom have achieved critical and peer recognition for their work. The examples selected for discussion are Nilah Magruder's *M. F. K.* (serialized online from 2012, print version 2017), *Genius* drawn by Afua Richardson, and *Niobe: She Is Life* (2015); *Niobe: She Is Death* (2017), co-created by Amandla Stenberg and Ashley A. Woods (2008-14), as well as ongoing (at the time of writing) publications such as Mildred Louis's *Agents of the Realm* (online publication from 2014) and *Omni* by Alitha E. Martinez (from 2019). This grouping will allow shared themes to emerge while simultaneously showing a diversity of ap-

1 *Black Comix* (2010) features forty-nine contemporary creators, only seven of whom are women. While Afua Richardson and Ashley A. Woods are included in the section, Creators Introduced, no women are featured in the longer chapters or interview formats. *Black Comix Returns* (2018) recognizes a notably more diverse roster of artists and has a cover drawn by Ashley A. Woods.

proaches. The initial discussion foregrounds the fictional heroines before attention turns to the creators who have brought these characters to life, and the contexts in which they have done so. I conclude by considering fandoms and the significance of having access to images and narratives that allow affirmative self-recognition and assertive imaginaries. These concerns are indeed the central premise of the hashtag phenomenon #BlackGirlMagic that grew to international prominence since 2015.

Black Girl Magic: Hashtag and More

The term Black Girl Magic, attributed to CaShawn Thompson in 2013, gradually grew into a widely spread and publicized grassroots movement to counter "the dangers of a culture that recognizes few achievements by black women" (Brinkhurst-Cuff). In the words of Kellie D. Hay, Rebekah Farrugia, and Deirdre "D. S. Sense" Smith, "#BlackGirlMagic is an emerging social movement that provides a contemporary cultural archive as it documents and gives visibility to the complex subjectivity and diverse expressions of young Black women and other women of color." Heavily driven by social media, the hashtag has mobilized many high-profile champions, including Amandla Stenberg, co-author of *Niobe: She Is Life*.

Some aspects of celebrity-activism and the attention economies of online circulation have produced a certain tension with the empowerment agenda of #BlackGirlMagic, as "the term's applicability to—and the extent to which the movement includes—women from diverse socio-economic positions also needs to be explored" (Hay, Farrugia, and Smith). Critics have argued that celebratory representations of Black female strength and beauty, especially in their online expressions, remain limited in terms of challenging social conditions and therefore political potential—especially as they often privilege normative bodies and beauty ideals (Hobson cit. in Davis 13; Jordan-Zachery and Harris 36). Commodification (through image repertoires, but more mundanely in the form of T-shirts and other merchandise) might indicate the project's susceptibility to consumerist mechanisms of recuperation. But, following Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris, Black Girl Magic is a cultural project with both a past and present that exceeds the hashtag phenomenon associated with its name.

In the late 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality aligned with a growing clamor of voices critical of Western second-wave feminist movements of the time, for the often unchecked privilege and unconscious bias manifesting as invocations of universalist womanhood. Intersectionality speaks to fundamental societal issues, no less urgent some thirty years later:

> The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women,

this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. (Crenshaw 1242)

If intersectionality makes visible intersecting pressures of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, economic inequalities, and social hierarchies, "#BlackGirlMagic is a form of critical literacy used by Black femmes, girls, and women" (Jordan-Zachery and Harris 14) in a project of self-determination. Across forms that are visual, material, and symbolic, re-imagining works to counter invisibility—a constitutive aspect of structural violence. Connecting #BlackGirlMagic to Black feminist principles, Jordan-Zachery and Harris identify four constitutive elements and/or practices, the first of which is community building (6). This is followed by "(2) challenging dehumanizing representations via a practice of self-definition; (3) rendering Black femmes, girls, and women visible; and (4) restoring what is sometimes violently taken" (6). The authors point out that the word "girl" here functions as a marker of community belonging and shared experience and, in the context of Black Girl Magic, should therefore not be taken as an indicator of age.

That said, the comics discussed here all feature youthful (often teenage) protagonists, a shared trait that forms a significant part of their address to young readerships. In these comics the compound term Black Girl Magic is thus imagined and personified in ways that are simultaneously embodied, literal, and symbolic.

Transformative Teamwork

Mildred Louis's *Agents of the Realm* is a prize-winning webcomic and a college-years coming-of-age story in the magical girl tradition found in manga, anime, and games. The story begins as five young women, Norah, Adele, Kendall, Paige, and Jordan, meet in their first year at college. Getting acquainted and discovering their special powers, the five protagonists learn of their responsibility to protect not only this world, but also another dimension within which they battle sinister and powerful foes. Their powers and weapons align with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) and an additional fifth (void), and can be accessed by means of magical amulets. The fights against evil in this story, which presents itself in the tradition of young adults' (graphic) fiction, might seem like a light-hearted distraction from negotiating everyday problems and growing pains. Yet, this device offers an expanded space for Louis's focus on female friendship and what an emerging scholar has identified as "intersectional self-definition" (Yohannes 12). In the FAQ section of Louis's website, the pre-emptive question "is this comic queer/LGTB?" is answered: "The simple answer is Yes. The majority of the cast identifies within the LGBTQ community, but it's not a comic that focuses on that. It's only one small part of who they are as a whole, and is treated as such." Similarly, while the family names of the char-

acters suggest ethnic diversity and Louis's rendering of skin tones encompasses multiple shades, the comic neither discusses race or ethnicity nor deals with such issues through its storyline. Louis's aim is, as she explains, to offer a space of respite from the troubles and pressures that mark the contemporary world through a "story that's fun, sincere, and full of friendship (and some drama)."

Louis is of a generation of U.S. comics creators for whom the influences of Japanese popular culture, especially in the form of manga and anime imports, have had substantial and formative impact.[2] The premise for *Agents of the Realm* is acknowledged by its creator as owing an explicit debt to the magical girl / mahō shōjo / 魔法 少女 genre not just in terms of visual qualities but the very concept and overall tone. It follows the premise of the magical girl closely, in particular the idea of *henshin* (metamorphosis or disguise) that is involved when characters transform from their everyday identities to heroic personas and costumes. In Anglo-American terms, this would potentially also suggest superhero tropes of dual identity and outfit changes, but Louis specifically references *Sailor Moon Crystal*, a 2014 animated adaptation of the manga series *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*. Transpacific popular culture exchanges, interchanges, transferences, and appropriations have long been multi-directional. The magical girl genres in anime can be traced back to an early prototype in the 1966 animated series *Mahōtsukai Sarī / Sally the Witch*, inspired by the American sitcom *Bewitched* (Sol Saks 1964-72) that had been dubbed and televised in Japan around this time (Sugawa).

Cultural exchange tends to involve appreciation (and thus often a valorization) of "the authentic." Yet, a consequence of such appreciation is likely to entail influences and borrowings and result in "cultural phenomen[a] whose meanings are dependent on context" (Denison 2). Both anime and manga are variable phenomena, the meanings and definitions of which are constantly reconfigured through their "(re-)production contexts, [their] distribution and [their] consumption by different sets of audiences" (Denison 2).[3] Despite "a sense of Western yearning for 'Japan'" (Iwabuchi 32), readers bring a different cultural framework to bear on texts, and creators who are inspired and influenced by such readings go on to incorporate and merge elements into their own work. Encounters and multi-directional flows between Japanese and Black American popular culture, involving a range of forms, have been repeatedly recognized by scholarship (Brickler; Condry; McLeod 263; Whaley 121-46).

At this juncture, it is worth reiterating the highly gendered address of Japanese manga publications. Shōnen (targeting a male readership) and shōjo (for a female demographic) manga, respectively stress ideas about gendered difference in terms of both the content and visual style. The focus on romantic and interpersonal relationships in shōju manga suggests an understanding of subject matter predicated on a construction of

2 For an expanded discussion of different sub-categories, see Whaley (154).

3 For a thorough examination of manga in America, see Brienza.

feminine identity and concerns. In stark contrast, shōnen manga's action and techno-fantasies appear unambiguously coded as masculine. Presumably a result of such understandings of gendered preferences, shōju manga and its sub-genres tend to use a soft and wispy line, depicting both male and female subjects as slender, wide-eyed, and delicate figures. Such visually gender-indeterminate characters stand in stark contrast to the determined binary coding of gender throughout Western popular culture, irrespective of whether reader demographics are perceived to be male or female. There are thus particular affordances brought into play as shōju manga is transposed and re-contextualized by Western readerships (Hurford). Shifting frames of interpretation of shōju manga has offered (Western readers in particular) a fertile space for gender ambivalence and openness to non-heteronormative identifications. It is also noticeable that the opening of these spaces has been taken up, creatively asserted, and extended by writers and artists who (whether implicitly or head-on) include in their work critiques of heteronormativity and the queering of conventional gender-based values. Louis's *Agents of the Realm* is but one of many such outcomes and is representative of this phenomenon, as it simultaneously challenges normative Whiteness in popular culture, including (but not limited to) comics and animation.

Cerebral Superpowers in Realist Settings

Like Louis's protagonists (when not venturing into another dimension), Cecelia Cobbina in *Omni* and Destiny Ajaye in *Genius* are embedded in a recognizable and realist setting of the contemporary United States. These two heroines are also gifted with exceptional minds, yet the tone and aesthetic of their stories are starkly different from those about Louis's magical college students. *Agents of the Realm* asserts its representational politics implicitly, but *Genius* quickly becomes uncannily prescient of actual events and issues. Written by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman and drawn by Afua Richardson, *Genius* was serialized by Top Cow[4] 2008-2014, when the highly mediatized events in Ferguson, Missouri, unfolded. Following the police shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Jr., on August 9, 2014, the heavy-handed police response to Black Lives Matter protests developed into something reminiscent of a military siege. *Genius* imagines an urban turf war against the LAPD led by Destiny Ajaye, a seventeen-year-old girl who has grown up fending for herself from a young age, having lost both her parents to police bullets. She also happens to be, as Bernadin's commentary in *LA Times* explains, "a military savant with a once-in-a-generation mind for strategy and tactics. So she turned a bunch of gangbangers into soldiers. She gave them an enemy on which to focus their rage. She declared war. On everyone."

Online commentators and fan blogs have drawn attention to the parallels between the emancipatory agenda and military struggle depicted

4 Image Comics brought out collected editions in 2015 and 2018.

in *Genius* and earlier civil rights era fiction (Taylor), as well as the complex relations between the Black Panther movement and West Coast gang culture (Brothers). As a character, Destiny Ajaye's strategic skills and intellect belie gendered expectations and those that are attached to her youth. These qualities are visually underlined by Richardson's depiction of her slight physical frame, yet countered by dynamic battle poses, dramatic angles, and splash pages employing visual language from martial arts cinema. Destiny is also a product of the oppressive and brutalizing societal forces and structures that she is waging her war against, and this is perhaps where the political charge of the comic ultimately lies.

Destiny Ajaye's exceptional cerebral powers are matched by those demonstrated by the protagonist of the *Omni* comics (2019-present), written by Devin Grayson, drawn by Alitha E. Martinez, and published by Humanoids.[5] Yet, the environments and social realities these characters inhabit are worlds apart. Cecelia Cobbina is a medical doctor who has returned to the United States after working for *Médecins Sans Frontières* in the People's Republic of Congo. As the publishers' blurb explains: "A young doctor suddenly and mysteriously acquires superpowers… as do several other individuals on the planet. But only her power can answer 'why.'" These superpowers manifest as seven different kinds of "intelligence" in a move that inherently calls into question conventional understandings and value-systems by which intelligence tends to be measured and captured. Cecelia's thought processes are rendered visible and form an important component of Martinez's art-work. Color-coding these seven aspects of intelligence according to a key (blue for medical knowledge and diagnostic capacity, green for deduction and logic, red and pink for emotional intelligence, purple for linguistic faculties, and so on) allows Martinez to incorporate and superimpose ghostly renditions of seven different iterations of Cobbina, each outlined in a different color, as the character deals with situations and problems she must solve. The simultaneity of these multiple versions of Cecelia Cobbina conjure a heightened version of mental and cognitive multi-tasking that effectively amounts to her superpower. This strategy for visual expression is as innovative as offering a superhero story where no punches are thrown—itself a radical departure.

Destiny Ajaye and Cecelia Cobbina present a vivid contrast to other Black comics heroines, also boasting exceptional powers. In the Frank Miller / Dave Gibbons co-production *Give Me Liberty* (Dark Horse 1990), Martha Washington is a young Black woman from a poor housing project turned into a patriotic superhero and central character. The four-part futuristic comics serial follows Martha's quest to serve a politically rotten and dystopian America and subjects her to a grueling series of brutal experiences that ultimately sees her transform into an emotionally disconnected figure (Sobel). In a similar fashion, the character Michonne in comics series and television adaptation *The Walking Dead* is characterized as emotionally lacking (Johnson 267-68), reduced

5 Humanoids is a California-based independent imprint established in 1998 that grew out of the French Bandes Dessinées publishing house, Les Humanoïdes Associés.

to a weaponized body (Willis 163-68), and re-iteration of the "angry black woman" trope (Abdurraquib). The powers displayed by Martha and Michonne are measured by physical prowess and brute force, in line with graphic depictions of violence stereotypically associated with comic books. As female characters they might break with gendered expectations, and as Black women they might seem to satisfy calls for more diverse representations.

However, the visceral violence metered out by Michonne and Martha is arguably matched by the sadistic treatment they are subjected to (by foes and their creators alike). Their female Black bodies constitute the intersection where graphic violence converges with the attention of readers, in an example of what Moya Bailey and Trudy have termed "misogynoir" (762-63). As encountered by readers, characters (including these) remain open to multiple interpretations. Read against the broader backdrop of racialized gendered narratives and representational tropes, Martha Washington's and Michonne's respective positioning as a powerful Black woman is effectively undermined in the very act of its assertion. As Dominique Deirdre Johnson eloquently summarizes the issue: "certain representational scripts regarding black femininity continue to function and be reproduced even within a context that could completely reimagine the social possibilities for all human subjects post-civil society" (269). In such a context, the cerebral supremacy demonstrated by Destiny Ajaye and Cecelia Cobbina seems a radical departure, and the contrast is made more poignant by their contemporary, realist locations: Destiny's strategic savvy is applied battling the LA police department on the streets of South Central while Cecelia's analytical and diagnostic mastery and lightning speed responses are performed in the institutional settings of healthcare provision. Yet, in the next two comics the magical powers displayed by extraordinary heroines are matched by equally mythical settings, the kinds of fictional landscapes that align with fantasy genres.

Courage and Vulnerability in Faraway Lands

The two protagonists encountered next are young female warriors endowed with special powers and an epic fight on their hands. As Deborah E. Whaley argues: "It is indeed in the terrain of the fantastic and phantasmagoria that Black female writers and artists can paint worlds of identification that reimagine the perceived fixed categories of gender, sex, and race that popular culture often relies upon" (161). *Niobe: She Is Life* (2015) was drawn by Ashley A. Woods and was co-written by Amandla Stenberg, known from the *Hunger Games* movie franchise,[6] and Sebastian A. Jones of Stranger Comics. While more likely an indication of the visibility and currency that comes with Stenberg's celebrity profile than a newfound interest in comics advanced by this publication, Janelle Okwodu in *Vogue* online notes that this comic book sold 10,000

6 Based on books by Suzanne Collins, the dystopian action-film *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012), starring Jennifer Lawrence, became an instant box-office hit (swiftly followed by three sequels), in which Stenberg had a supporting role.

copies during its launch and "was the first internationally distributed comic with a black female author, artist, and central character."

The protagonist in this coming-of-age tale of love, betrayal, and sacrifice is an orphaned teenage elf and the would-be savior of the vast and volatile fantasy world of Asunda. Having initially appeared in Jones's graphic novel *The Untamed: A Sinner's Prayer* (2009), Niobe Ayutami and the setting of Asunda were re-worked for serialization in collaboration with Stenberg and Woods. The story engages with profound and large-scale real-world issues, such as structural social inequalities and division predicated on difference and resulting conflict. In the course of her encounters with clashing factions and authoritarian forces, Niobe navigates tests of judgment and other personal growing pains. By the end of the first story arc, her innocence has been shattered but she retains the heroic qualities that make her a power fantasy, offering readers identification with a fictional character wielding agency and capacities that far exceed their own.[7] In *Niobe: She Is Death* (2017), Niobe battles on behalf of victims of human trafficking, effectively taking up the role of a vigilante warrior.

Suspicion and prejudice between different species also play their part in Nilah Magruder's story about Abbey. Published in 2017 by San Rafael's Insight Editions in California, *M. F. K.* (what this acronym stands for remains shrouded in mystery) is set in a desert landscape interspersed with small communities of humans and also inhabited by humanoid beings with special powers. Magruder's aesthetic bears the hallmarks of multiple influences, most notably animation. Her panel compositions and transitions have cinematic qualities, and her characters' large eyes, exaggerated facial expressions, and gender ambiguity evoke influences of anime. Otherwise, sparse and uncluttered settings are presented in rich color and with emphatic use of shade to render the three-dimensionality of form. This, too, echoes the privileging of expression and plasticity over detail in certain animation styles. The story itself references feudal relations as well as magic, creating a medievalism reminiscent of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon 2005-2008), an influential American animated series set in an imaginary fantasyland with pseudo-Asian characteristics. The location of *M. F. K.*, however, remains undetermined.

In this world, structures of governance have long since disintegrated and relations between different groups are shaped by ad hoc conflict solutions, protectionism, and extortion. The protagonist Abbey, a resourceful young girl with impaired hearing, is on a mission to take her mother's ashes back to her homeland. She belongs to a group of humanoids called the *parasai*. The *parasai* have special powers, but, after abandoning their role as protectors of the small towns and communities, have instead formed bands of marauding tricksters. Because of the threat and stigma attached to them, it is in Abbey's interest to keep her special powers hidden when she arrives in the small community of

7 For a more detailed definition of power fantasy, see Guillaume on Wendy Pini's *Elfquest*.

Little Marigold. As circumstances conspire to keep her from leaving, she gradually develops relationships with some Little Marigold inhabitants. When the community faces an outside threat, Abbey realizes that she is the one who has the capacity to save the community and its way of life. Like Niobe, Abbey is a lone heroine on a coming-of-age journey, and, like Niobe, she is subject to a range of pressures and demands. She must negotiate prejudices, social schisms, and the impetus to stand up to oppressive forces. Both characters, youth and fragility notwithstanding, personify agency and thereby offer a productive space for power fantasy.

Jalondra A. Davis posits that, in Black women's sci-fi, young heroines tend to "access their magic not through superhuman gifts, but through otherhuman ontologies, communal resources and exclusion from other forms of power," and that the "magic [of these protagonists] is indelibly connected to their vulnerability" (15). This avoids an ideal (the "strong Black woman") predicated on individual responsibility and affective labor, a criticism that has also been levelled at online manifestations of #BlackGirlMagic (Davis 13-14). In alignment with André M. Carrington's notion of speculative Blackness, Davis's "otherhuman" describes "the being of non-white, non-male, non-property owning, and/or differently abled individuals" (15). The elf-warrior Niobe and *parasai* wanderer Abbey are presented as overtly vulnerable in terms of age, physical slightness, and outsider position.

Their embodiment of vulnerability, and simultaneously of tenacity and strength, seems crucial to the appeal of these heroines. Both resourcefully navigate hostile territories, and, through experience learn to take calculated risks. As importantly, they generate affiliations and social support networks. These are individual quests and journeys of becoming, which makes for a familiar kind of heroic tale, even when invested in and engaging on behalf of a community. More radically, both the Niobe stories and *M. F. K.* engage with and explicitly involve issues of social inequality, exploitation, and structural violence. The cognitive remove offered by their imaginary and fantastical settings facilitates their ability to pursue these topics while maintaining a sense of wonder and excitement.

This introduction of fictional comics protagonists has been informed by wide-ranging cultural and discursive contexts, from shōnen manga to superhero comics and Black feminist and speculative fiction. Shifting our attention to creators will allow the consideration of the professional contexts from which the work has emerged.

Creators in Context

Independent small press publishing and webcomics are both important routes for developing a following and reputation and can also offer avenues for projects that involve risks that larger publishing houses might not be willing to take. As already outlined, Richardson's work

in *Genius* was published by Top Cow, an independent comics publisher founded in 1992. Martinez has published her own works, including the comic *Yume and Ever* (2006) and the illustrated novella *Foreign* (2014), through her own imprint Ariotstorm Production. Like Martinez, Richardson also writes her own material, and this is where a shared interest in "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy" (Rutledge) prominently comes to the fore. Comics publishing, in the United States and elsewhere, comprises a wide spectrum of eclectic genres and a broad range of formats. Realist and slice-of-life genres like (auto)biography, reportage, and documentary have gained mainstream recognition, and graphic novels are now increasingly taken up by mainstream book publishers. Speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy, meanwhile, maintain their prominence in small press contexts.

But for creators, small press and self-publishing rarely amounts to a reliable or sufficient income on its own. For many comics creators, carving out a career demands moving between projects, contracts, and contexts in highly agile ways. Woods self-published her action-fantasy webcomic series, *Millennia War*,[8] while still a student. Following the completion of her film and animation degree, Woods spent time in Japan where she exhibited some of her works. The educational backgrounds of both Woods and Louis indicate porous boundaries between comics and animation. Louis originally studied animation, and her CV includes some widely circulated titles such as *Invader Zim* (a Nickelodeon animated dark comedy sci-fi series) and the *Rick and Morty* spin-off *Rick and Morty: Lil' Poopy Superstar*. In 2014, she began to balance freelance work as an illustrator and comics artist with her continued online publication of installments of her *Agents of the Realm* webcomic. Magruder's *M. F. K.* likewise first saw light of day as a self-published webcomic, before it came out in print. But she has also written and storyboarded for DreamWorks and Disney and pursues a career as an illustrator of children's books.

Both Richardson and Martinez have established careers in the U.S. superhero comics industry, and both are known for their work on the Marvel title *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*.[9] That title's 2016-2017 spin-off stories comprised a mere six issues, yet brought different subjectivities to the fore in ways likely to leave a lasting legacy. Written by Roxane Gay and brought to life by Martinez, the story of Ayo and Aneka follows two guardswomen in Black Panther's personal protection squad, the Dora Milaje, as they face challenges that include both personal loyalties and political allegiances. This not only gives center stage to characters who have historically been relegated to supporting roles and turns them into fully developed, rounded, and credible protagonists in their own right. It also is the first instance of a queer African couple starring in a mainstream superhero comic published in the United States (Gipson 35).

Richardson is a prolific cover artist for both Marvel and DC comics, who has contributed to titles including (but not limited to) *X-Men*

[8] See Whaley (155, 171-73) for an expanded discussion of *Millennia War*.

[9] See Daniel Stein's article in this issue for more.

'92, *Captain Marvel*, and *Captain America*. Beyond the superhero genre, she has also produced a graphic biography (with John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell).[10] Despite her already considerable CV, Richardson continues to be hailed as "a rising star" (Howe; Spirer). Martinez has similarly noted: "I'm considered a 'brand new artist' at every convention I go to. People have no idea. And why would they really?" (Horne). Whether such obliviousness is reasonable can be debated, but it overlooks that Martinez is an industry veteran with more than twenty years' experience. In addition to *Black Panther* and *Moon Girl* she has a list of well-known titles under her belt, including *Iron Man, X-men: Black Sun, Marvel Age Fantastic Four*, *Voltron*, and Archie Comics' *New Crusaders* and *Riverdale*.[11] Martinez can, moreover, lay claim to pioneer status in the comics industry, having started her career in the early 1990s. "When I started, I was a unicorn—there were no other women of color working for the big two in the capacity of penciler, so every book was a new fight" (qtd. in McMillan). But even now, boasting a wide-ranging back catalog, wider recognition seems less than forthcoming. These creators sustain their careers through adaptability, willingly moving across and between contexts. Such creators rarely sit neatly in distinct categories of independent comics and mainstream titles and franchises, but travel between them (and indeed also between comics and other forms, whether live action or animation). All the while, they still manage to maintain commitments to more personal projects to satisfy their own story-telling ambitions.

Digital platforms allow certain opportunities, such as self-published webcomics, but they also foster connectivity through forums for discussion, promotion, and visibility to constitute and support community building. The significance of actual and material (as opposed to projected and imagined) digital technologies for twenty-first-century iterations of Afrofuturism have been noted (Everett 138-40). The internet has enabled a community of Black comics culture to emerge beyond the established industry structures (Lackaff and Sales 73-77), even as many of its key contributors also remain engaged within such contexts. Meanwhile, the online spaces so vital to creator communities also offer the means for dispersed fan-bases to connect.

Readerly Meanings and Fan Communities

Having previously focused on Black female comics characters and their Black female creators, the causality implied by directly continuing to Black female fandoms would be problematic. Fiction offers and allows acts of affective identification; it invites empathy through acts of imagination and the vicarious inhabiting of subject positions that exceed one's lived experience. The absence of empirical inquiry, moreover, places this discussion at odds with what might be considered a fundamental principle of fan studies. Rather more modestly, my intention is

10 *Run: Book One* follows on from the critically fêted trilogy *March* (2016), a chronicle of the Civil Rights movement and graphic memoir by the late Congressman John Lewis. Since Richardson's involvement at an earlier stage, the project was brought to completion with the illustrator L. Fury and published in 2021.

11 Martinez's extensive back catalog is listed under her author profile on the Simon & Schuster webpage.

to connect the comics discussed to the community aspects of the Black Girl Magic project, through some indicative consideration of readers.

For comics readers, initial encounters occur in acts of reading, acts that may take place in highly personal and intimate spaces of engagement. Fandom, however, is an engagement incorporating and constituted by highly social dynamics, and it also holds recognized potential for financial profit. The association between fandom and comics is longstanding; comics publishers have historically encouraged reader involvement and input (for instance, the early adoption of readers' letters sections in serialized print comics), long before "the difficulties to monetize content in digital environments […] put fans at the heart of industry responses to a changing marketplace" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2). Sci-fi and fantasy genres, and the manga and anime forms, are commonly recognized for generating prolific fan production subcultures and cosplay communities. "While it's all play, there's a power in breaking past rigid identity parameters and adopting the persona of one's favorite hero" (Womack 14). In addition to such opportunities for liberating and playful self-expression, the social, interactional, and community aspects of fandom involve multilateral crossings between physical and digital space.

In 2002, when Anna Everett wrote about Black press properties making the transition to online publication, she remarked on the internet's "expressive, self-fashioning and emancipatory potential" (141) as a space for counter-hegemonic discourse.[12] Arguably, the formation of what Nancy Fraser has named "counterpublics" (qtd. in Everett 141) exceeds news and current affairs to incorporate more encompassing notions of cultural engagement, media consumption, and self-realization. Alfred L. Martin Jr.'s research into Black fandoms underscores this point, as he argues that Black fandoms are dynamically constituted through "the interplay of must-see-blackness, economic consumption, knowledge of the culture industries and fan evangelism" (750). Support for Black projects, cultural producers, and creatives through fandom is also performed with the knowledge that commercially successful products are likely to make further and similar content propositions more viable (749). Martin thus positions Black fandoms, in their vast plurality, as "a form of activism that uses the language of the culture industries (money) to fight for (political) visibility" (751).

To presume a given age or gender of readerships would be reductive and misleading; reader identification is not predicated on obvious similarity with the characters that inspire affection. This, however, in no way diminishes the impact of (not) being able to recognize oneself in the repertoire of images and narratives that make up cultural imaginaries. In her book on Black sci-fi and fantasy culture, author and film-maker Ytasha L. Womack vividly remembers dressing up as Princess Leia for Halloween as a girl, but also her yearning to feel included on her own terms in the galactic imaginaries that ignited her imagination (5). In the introduction to Damian Duffy and John Jennings's 2017 graphic novel

12 Everett is, however, acutely prescient about the problematic convergences of expanding media technologies, concentrated ownership, and politics of deregulation that have been increasingly brought into relief over recent years.

adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, novelist Nnedi Okorafor likewise draws on personal recollection. In this case, the lasting memory is of a surprise encounter in a bookstore:

> As I strolled through the aisles, something extraordinary caught my eye, something I'd only ever seen once before in the science fiction and fantasy section of a bookstore: a cover featuring a dark-skinned black woman.
>
> I was staring at *Wild Seed* by Octavia Estelle Butler.
>
> There was only one copy of the book there on that fateful day. I grabbed it, clasped it to my chest as if someone was going to snatch it from me, quickly bought it, and ran to my dorm room to start reading. (Okorafor iv)

This recollection captures the significance and formative role of stories and images as resources for self-definition. The expression "you can only be what you can see" offers a vernacular counterpart and corresponds with the foregrounding of role models and pedagogies that Martin (746-47) has observed in Black fandoms.

Octavia Butler, who considered herself as accountable to three readerships (Black readers, feminist readers, and science fiction readers), proposed that "science fiction is not only about the problems of the world, but also about solving the problems of the world" (qtd. in Pough and Hood x).[13] Narratives of agency (following Butler) and Black female protagonists[14] who are simultaneously strong and vulnerable (as described by Davis), become a potent combination for the role model function identified by Martin as valued by Black fandoms. Okorafor's anecdote meanwhile underscores the immediacy of visual representations and speaks to the particular affordances of comics. In comics, such as the ones discussed here and others like them, representations are given tangible graphic form. Destiny Ajaye, Cecelia Cobbina, the friends in *Agents of the Realm*, Abbey, and Niobe thus come to personify a visibility politics (Martin 746, 751). It is also worth recognizing that they contribute to a wider twenty-first-century "surge in fantastic representations of Black womanhood" that encompasses multiple forms and media (Pough and Hood xi). The comics encountered here have in common that they offer "much-needed models of black girlhood as valuable and empowered, yet they do so without dismissing the structural conditions that black girls face" (Davis 27). This posits a long-overdue challenge to popular culture imaginaries still dominated by hegemonic Whiteness, in which token inclusions of Black women are often relegated to supporting roles and/or reduced to narrow meta-scripts (Jordan-Zachery 4-5). The very plurality of narratives, heroines, and genre affiliations is therefore significant.

13 This emancipatory agenda can be applied more broadly to traditions in fiction by Black women that involve revisiting pasts haunted by trauma, but also imagining and envisioning futures, and to critical Afrofuturism, as outlined by Reynaldo Anderson (181-83).

14 Graphic novel adaptations of Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) have been published by John Jennings and Damian Duffy in 2017 and 2020, respectively.

Conclusion

Treated loosely as a collective, the comics discussed here tackle head-on the "dearth of young adult (YA) fantasy and science fiction titles in the mainstream where girls of color are the heroes" (Yohannes 6). The varied age range of protagonists suggests different reader demographics, including but not limited to those catered to by children's and YA fiction. Settings also range from imaginary lands to realist depictions of contemporary locations. If one were to adhere to conventional genre distinctions, even the limited sample of works attended to here refuses to fit easily or obviously within a single, distinctive category. Their transformative imaginations and agendas nevertheless connect them. These comics' heroines assert the presence of Black femmes, girls, and women on comics pages in self-defining plurality and diversity. In so doing, they offer resources for fan practices and community building (both online and elsewhere) in alignment with the constitutive aspects of the project of Black Girl Magic (Jordan-Zachery and Harris 6). The protagonists offer symbolic resources of self-determination and re-imagining. This is, in turn, both mirrored and underwritten by their creators, who assert their presence as Black female cultural producers: writers, artists, and publishers. In short, these comics not only challenge historically narrow representational repertoires (notable exceptions notwithstanding), but confound preconceived notions about comics cultures, creators, and readerships. Their transformative imaginaries thus include, and exceed, the images and narratives on their pages.

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Morro da Favela: Representing Brazilian Urban Peripheries through Visual Media[1]

Javiera Irribarren Ortiz

Abstract

André Diniz's *Morro da Favela* is a graphic narrative based on the life and work of Maurício Hora, a Brazilian photographer from Morro da Providência. I propose that while Hora's original photographs represent the image of this favela from the perspective of one of its inhabitants, thus creating a counter-hegemonic visual archive, Diniz's graphic narrative serves as a remediation object that reinforces Hora's artistic commitment to social contestation. The formal techniques and the didactic tone stimulate the widespread distribution of the graphic narrative that visually frames Hora's (auto)biographical storytelling and that has been translated into various languages. The poetics and aesthetics of both registers, photography and graphic narrative, merge in Diniz's work: they become a counter-hegemonic instrument whose modes of depiction are disassociated from preconceived social constructions of the favela, which have been widely replicated by the media.

Key Words: *Morro da Favela*; André Diniz; Maurício Hora; graphic narrative; urban peripheries

Introduction

Morro da Favela is a graphic narrative by the Brazilian scriptwriter and comics artist André Diniz.[2] It is based on the life of Maurício Hora, a photographer born and raised in the favela Morro da Providência, who is committed to changing the stigmatized representations of the favelas in cultural productions. Hora defines himself as a *favelado*[3] photographer because he belongs to the urban peripheries, where he learned how to frame different perspectives of the world through his pictures. To him, photography is a social weapon that can transform historical misrepresentations of the favela's people, spaces, and cultural dynamics.

2 I use the term graphic narrative because it synthesizes different names attributed throughout its history: the newspaper comic strip (since 1890), comic book (since 1930), and graphic novel (since 1970) (Chute 17). "Graphic narrative" is a mode of understanding different hybrid objects that show narrative sequences through images, such as comics, graphic novels, manga, photo books, murals, paintings, *estampas*, and photo dramas, among others.

3 The term *favelado*, "slum-dweller," has mostly been used in a pejorative sense throughout Brazil. In recent years, however, the term has been reclaimed and reinterpreted by inhabitants of the urban peripheries. Maurício Hora uses it to refer to himself and to proudly highlight, at the same time, his belonging to Morro da Providência and the history of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. My usage of *favelado* refers explicitly to the empowering dimension the term acquires through Hora's reappropriation.

Incorporating one medium or more into another medium is the broad understanding of remediation. Based on Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's considerations in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999), this process also implies an aesthetic transposition that adjusts and reinterprets the various dimensions of the referred object into the specific codes of the other medium. It is not just an adaptation or appropriation; it is the construction of dialogues to establish a continuum between objects through two procedures: immediacy, which attempts to make invisible the particularities of the referred medium in the remediated object, and hypermediacy, which brings attention to the materiality of the reference itself in its remediation.[4] André Diniz's digital woodblock drawings result from transposing Hora's photographic representation into the medium of graphic narratives. However, he also maintains the (auto)biographical and socially driven aesthetics of Hora's original photographs that aim to represent the image of the favela Morro da Providência from the perspective of one of its *favelados*, thus forming a counter-hegemonic visual archive. As a result, Diniz's graphic narrative serves as a remediation object that reinforces Hora's artistic commitment to social contestation and extends the counter-hegemonic visual archive into another medium.

The main question of this article is to what extent the specific possibilities of visual media allow an alternative representation of Brazilian urban peripheries, disassociated from preconceived social and medial constructions. To explore this question, I will first show how the widespread reception of this graphic narrative is related to its "transmedial embedding," which consists of photography, animation, exhibitions, and translations. Secondly, I will analyze in detail different aspects of Diniz's formal techniques and his visual storytelling to unfold the relations between the poetics and the aesthetic elaboration of *Morro da Favela*.

Transmedial Embedding

The first edition of *Morro da Favela* was published in Brazil by Barba Negra in 2011 and publicized with an animated video by Wesley Rodrigues. In this graphic narrative, André Diniz uses a characteristic style that digitally reproduces the woodblock printing technique. Through thick black lines that shape characters and spaces on white backgrounds, he frames seven sections that capture passages of Hora's memories along with critical considerations around his experiences within the favela. This version, as well as the first Portuguese edition (2013), the French translation (2012), and the English (2012) translation, has an eighth and last section especially dedicated to compile Hora's pictures that served as an inspiration for Diniz's work. The Polish (2017) and the second Portuguese editions (2020) have an additional ninth section of twelve new pages, which includes a review of Hora's recent projects that also promote social engagement in the favela.[5]

4 This synthesis mainly considers Bolter and Grusin's framework proposed in their first chapter called, "Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation" (20-50).

5 In this article, I quote the second Portuguese edition (2020). However, the page numbers belong to the PDF version that André Diniz provided me. I thank the author for his engagement with my enquiries and for his permission to publish selected images from *Morro da Favela*.

On February 14, 2020, the Bienal de Quadrinhos de Curitiba, in collaboration with the Embassy of Brazil in Portugal, the Casa Pau-Brasil, and the Portuguese publisher Polvo, inaugurated an exhibition called *Brasil em Quadrinhos*, "Brazil in Comics."[6] This showcase displayed various original photographs of Hora and the augmented edition of *Morro da Favela*, which also started the new Polvo's series called *Romance Gráfico Brasileiro*, "Brazilian Graphic Novels." The main purpose of this series is "to introduce the Portuguese reader to some of the best that has been done recently in overseas comics" (Deus me Livro).[7]

The poetics and aesthetics of Hora's pictures as well as Diniz's graphic storytelling offer scopes of experiences from inside the favela that are detached from a stigmatizing fabulation. I interpret the aforementioned exhibition, the different editions, and translations as part of a movement that takes a critical and artistic stance against cultural misconceptions and social stereotypes to create a counter-vision of the favela—one that neither considers the favela as a space relegated from urban and social structures nor as a racialized source for media reproductions of violence.

As Esther Império Hamburger discusses, the media's form of appropriation tend to link the urban peripheries and their subjects with violence, poverty, and race. These representations characterize perverse modes that "control the ways their image appears on the screen" (2). She argues that certain movies, such as *City of God* (2002) or *Bus 174* (2002), build their characters and scenarios from prejudice and discrimination by assuming a "reality" that only exists because it was systematically reproduced and thereby perpetuated through the media. Nevertheless, through the analysis of *Morro da Favela* and Hora's photographic work as its referent, this article explores the possibilities of visual media to build counter-hegemonic archives that defeat the widespread perverse representation of the favela in the media.

Visual Storytelling: Life Experiences and Color Scheme

This "Romance Quadrinho," as Marcus Vinícius Faustini defines it in the prologue of the first Brazilian edition, is a graphic narrative that mixes biography and sequential art and "affirms the current creative position of artists of popular origin in the search for other representations of their territories"[8] (qtd. in Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 1st ed. 6). Hora's artistic commitment aims to represent the favela as an unbiased space, and Diniz remediates Hora's poetics by highlighting particular passages of his life that depict Morro da Providência according to his memories as a *favelado*, and specifically as a Black child.

Since Black people's agency has been diminished from official Brazilian historiography, the major potential of graphic narratives that thematize personal experiences resides in discussing and offering "new possibilities of expression and representation to 'retell' Brazil's history(ies) from a different point of view" (Wrobel, "Narrating Other Perspectives"

6 The exhibition would have been open between February 14 and May 31, 2020, but it was interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19.

7 "dar a conhecer ao leitor português um pouco do que de melhor se tem vindo a fazer recentemente nos 'quadrinhos' de além-mar." All translations from Portuguese to English are mine if not stated otherwise.

8 "A publicação deste 'Romance quadrinho,' pela Barba Negra, afirma o atual lugar de invenção dos artistas de origem popular na busca de outras representações de seus territórios."

107; see also "História(s) redesenhada(s)"). Diniz's achievement is to problematize political and social matters of the urban peripheries from the point of view of the oppressed in his graphic narrative. In doing so, Diniz joins ranks with other contemporary Brazilian comics artists such as Marcelo D'Salete, Spacca, Sirlene Barbosa, and João Pinheiro.

Diniz's digital woodblock printing technique maintains solid black-and-white colors throughout all its translations. However, despite my initial thoughts, this particularity was not a conscious decision that directly counters racial biases. In a personal interview that I conducted with Diniz in May 2020, he declared that his choice results from economic and stylistic reasons: printing in black and white is cheaper, and his drawing style follows the fanzine aesthetic with which he began his career in 1994 with the publication of *Grandes Enigmas da Humanidade*. Similarly, the black-and-white color scheme establishes an implicit transmedial dialogue with photography, acting as a "photographic negative" of Maurício Hora's art that transposes and expands his social commitment into another medium. Nevertheless, although the black-and-white color scheme was not a premeditated decision, this formal aspect mobilizes a depiction that does not assume a racial predetermination regarding the favela, which is consistent with the creation of counter-tales within visual media.

Figure 1. "Dona Iracema." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 108.

I interpret the few colored passages—among the predominantly black-and-white solid patterns—as visual hints of two important statements that represent the favela. On the one hand, the only colored panel of the first edition shows Dona Iracema with the aim of portraying the "wonderful" people that live in Morro da Providência (Figure 1).[9] Diniz captures a multilayered meta-visual effect that unfolds Hora's poetics—the frontal medium-shot perspective of Dona Iracema mimics the exact moment when Hora used the photographic gaze to represent a counter-hegemonic visual storytelling of the favela. The readers are confronted directly with Dona Iracema's gaze at them; at the same time, they adopt

9 In the first edition, this panel is colored in blue-green tones, similar to the colors that Diniz uses for the cover of the different editions of *Morro da Favela.*

Hora's position and his "frame" of Dona Iracema, that is Hora's perspective as a *favelado* photographer.

Figure 2. "Casa Amarela." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 127.

On the other hand, in the extended version there are two additional yellowish panoramic panels of *Casa Amarela*, "Yellow House" (Figure 2). In collaboration with the French artist Jean René (JR), Maurício Hora founded a community center dedicated to promoting cultural activities and workshops *for* and *with* favela residents in 2009. Therefore, Diniz's decision of coloring this specific building seeks to highlight Hora's headquarters inside Morro da Providência where he promotes artistic initiatives that engage with the community.

In order to offer a de-stereotyped perspective of the favela, as I argued earlier, it is necessary to depict it from views that underline everyday moments removed from excessive violence, images of poverty, and the external gaze at the favela as a racialized territory. However, it is also important to avoid an idealized representation that does not critically acknowledge systemic issues that take place in this social space such as the lack of healthcare and job opportunities. In *Morro da Favela*, these nuances appear when reconstructing Hora's memories. His point of view as a child and his interpretations of certain life passages are completely different from the conclusions he draws as an adult (the present voice or narrator that appears in *Morro da Favela*) from the respective situations. The visual storytelling contrasts Maurício's happiest moments with meditations on his father's and brother's criminal histories as well as the untreated mental health condition of his mother.

Figure 3. "Hora's Childhood Memories." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 20.

In Figure 3, the first two panels of the sequence show Maurício in the rain, playing with a paper boat in a pool of water in the streets of Morro da Providência. The following panel, however, exhibits a surprised and apparently afraid child staring at the paper boat which is now guided by an unknown hand. In the last part of the sequence, the apprehensive mood swiftly changes to a scene of happiness, when Maurício realizes that the hand belongs to his well-dressed father who has finally come back to the favela after spending some time in prison. A few panels later, from a zenithal perspective (Figure 4), we witness a loving father join-

ing a family dinner. Nonetheless, the captions tell another story which reflects on his father's criminal history, one motivated by false pretenses of a life without restraints and for which he shifted "careers" from a bookkeeper, a valued profession at that time, to a drug lord.

Figure 4. "Hora's Childhood Memories." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 22.

Similarly, to tell the unsolved death of Hora's brother, Diniz depicts a sequence that highlights the happiest moment Maurício shared with Jorge while we discover through the captions that Jorge's body was, presumably, one of the nineteen corpses found in a pile of bones in Sumaré, another favela in Rio de Janeiro, where the police used to

throw the remains of people they killed in the favela. His brother and childhood hero, with whom he flies kites high up on the hill, a symbol of childhood and life dreams, becomes one of the many—and nameless—victims of structural violence and crime. Not only were his father and brother consumed by the circle of criminality, his mother fell victim to a precarious health system that overlooked her schizophrenia as well as a social system that did not pay attention to the domestic violence that ended with her death at the hands of Hora's father.

Visual Counter-Perspectives

In my view, through this specific form of visual storytelling, André Diniz's achievement with *Morro da Favela* is to generate actual changes in the sociopolitical understanding of favela life by showing the structural power asymmetries that lead to an increased scarcity of resources, poverty, and criminality. In our aforementioned personal interview, Diniz explained the process of collecting Hora's life episodes. In their conversations, the photographer used to talk casually about his memories, thoughts, and projects from which André Diniz chose specific episodes that followed one goal: to avoid building the plot around violence. Furthermore, in another interview to promote the 2020 exhibition in Portugal, the comics artist declared that he also took into consideration the relation between biographical components and the poetics of Hora's work:

> I did not want to follow this line of fiction that thematizes the favela as a pretext to show scenes of violence and shootings, to make a Brazilian "Western." I precisely wanted to go against that. I started to be interested in the human figure of Maurício, in his life story, in his work with photography that transforms the favela into art. (qtd. in Quaresma)[10]

The selection of specific life episodes related to Hora's social and artistic engagement therefore conditions Diniz's visual storytelling; at the same time, he avoids modes of representation that show the favela as a place of contagious disease and social pathologies. These standpoints are linked to the hygienist discourse of the urban peripheries that dates to the 1920s. For instance, as Lícia do Prado Valladares explains, twentieth-century João Augusto Mattos Pimenta's and Alfred Agache's images of leprosy and danger of contagion determined the characterization of the favela as an urban space of illness (27). The relationship between the hygienic discourse and the "heritage of poverty" also determined stereotypes that have remained attached to the history of its representation. Thus, diverging from social misrepresentation of the favela seeks to build a path for social justice that defeats the politics involved in perpetuating stigmatized ideas of the favela.

Maurício Hora's pictures portray the favela's beauty and dignity. For him, the use of photography is "not to shock too much, not to be

10 "Eu não queria ir nesta corrente da ficção que busca a favela como um pretexto para mostrar cenas de violência, de tiroteio, para fazer um 'western' brasileiro. Eu queria justamente ir contra isso. Comecei a ficar interessado pela figura humana do Maurício, pela história de vida, pelo trabalho dele com a fotografia, transformando a favela em arte."

that dramatic, but to show reality. There are also very beautiful aspects, such as the favela landscape. Before, nobody saw this landscape" (qtd. in Quaresma).[11] Under the premise of the notorious perception of the favela as a dangerous territory that potentially worsens in the shadows, he reminds us that there are not enough images and media representations of the nighttime perspective from the favela. Thus, offering alternative representations would help to overcome social prejudices. An example of such alternative representation would be Hora's panoramic photograph of the city at night (Figure 5). From the hill, the elevated perspective allows us to embrace the immensity of the territory and witness the imposing Central Station's tower of Rio de Janeiro. In fact, the main purpose of this photograph is the reenactment of the view that the *favelados* have by night.

Figure 5. *"Morro da Providência*, photograph by Maurício Hora." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 111.

11 "não chocar muito, não ser tão dramática, mas mostrar a realidade. Também tem coisas muito bonitas, como a paisagem da favela. Antes, ninguém via essa paisagem."

In Diniz's remediation of Hora's picture (Figure 6), however, his way of visual storytelling adds an important nuance that accentuates the biases within the territory of the favela itself. Seeing what the *favelados* see is mediated by the "owners" of this viewpoint. Through the captions, the *favelado* who watches over the hill is represented, giving Hora the permission to take a panoramic picture, but he isn't shown—the reader just sees the paradigmatic favela architectures. At the same time, this scene highlights the strict power structures within the favela: Hora is not free to just photograph everything he would like, which complicates the process of building alternative visual archives of Morro da Providência. Diniz shows this conflict by depicting the two watchmen that accompany Hora as dark, anonymous silhouettes, a form of representation that reduces the aspect of violence normally reproduced in images distributed by the media—people with guns—through visual abstraction. In addition, distinct from the original picture, the light that materializes the panoramic view arises from Morro da Providência—what illuminates the city is the favela, and Hora's camera is a social weapon that mediates in the process of capturing an alternative representation *of* and *from* the favela.

Figure 6. *"Morro da Providência*, Hora's Photograph Drawn by Diniz." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 84.

Figure 6 also shows a type of architectural mirroring or inversion: the buildings of the city mimic the hectic planning and somewhat confused organization of the favela buildings. Contrary to the idea of urbanization that discourses of social planning intend to evoke, the city is

not an organized space diametrically opposed to the visual chaos that characterizes the favela. As a matter of fact, Diniz also declared in the above-cited interview that it was a conscious and fundamental decision to maintain the unregulated disposition of the houses, the asymmetries, the "hill" point of view, the interrupted vanishing points, and the "challenges of laws of architecture and physics," as he called them. I understand this artistic approach as related to the attempt to take a stand and recognize the actual spatial components that characterize a territory built on the go with the tools and materials that were within the reach of a population systematically exempted from housing in both rural and urban areas.

Therefore, instead of visually depicting the favela in a more structured version that would correspond to the perspective of controlled urban planning, Diniz achieves a counter-hegemonic perspective when he integrates spatial nuances which precisely frame it as a geopolitical space. In the same vein and consistent with moving apart from idealizing or romanticizing the favela, Diniz's remediating involves showing its particularities just as they are. Furthermore, recognizing the rights of property of the people that inhabit and built the favela involves its underlying geographic identity as a political power for social change. Moreover, I understand his decision to maintain the architectural features inside the favela as a method of cultural diffusion whose aim is to portray the actual scarcity that derives from insufficient state policies that do not ensure housing justice.

Visual Activism: Hora's Poetics and Aesthetics

Similarly, the counter-hegemonic perspective is retrieved when Diniz includes the exhibition "Casa França-Brasil" (2009) in the visual storytelling. Once again, in collaboration with JR, this installation exhibited both artists' photographs of Morro da Providência around a reassembled real favela shack that Hora bought from a former student that attended his workshops. The idea was to offer the public an engaging experience through which they could relate the representation of the *morro* from within and from outside its characteristic architecture. Nevertheless, I underscore that Hora's action of purchasing this house and positioning it in the context of a gallery showcase is apart from a charity-based discourse or an attempt to commodify the experience of the favela. In fact, Maurício's commitment with his community is persistent.[12]

Within the framework of *Casa Amarela*'s initiatives, Maurício Hora teaches according to the methodology through which he learned how to frame the world and which he called "olhar fotográfico" or "photographic gaze," because "this is photography, seeing before having taken the image" (Diniz 94).[13] As he was not allowed to take pictures of every place inside the favela, he developed a feasible technique for which he does not need a camera but only his eyes and hands to frame the shot

[12] For more information on Hora's social activism in Morro da Providência, see Sánchez et al.

[13] "fotografia é isso, é ver antes de ter feito a imagem."

(Figure 7). His technique also became a viable teaching method because his students usually do not have the necessary equipment to take pictures, and *Casa Amarela*'s funding is limited.

Figure 7. "Olhar fotográfico." André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 95.

Additionally, in the augmented edition, we learn about Hora's activism through the description of different projects that also involve photography as a means for achieving social justice. For example, in 2012, Hora collaborated with the Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto 'Vhils' in an urban intervention in Morro da Providência. The aim was to mobilize the debate around the massive displacement of families that would take

place to build the cable car inaugurated in 2016 for the Olympics. Both artists used the social space to carve the fronts of favela houses with five gigantic faces that made visible the victims of the removing plan. In another project, called "Morro da favela à Providência de Canudos," he tried to establish affiliative relationships between Morro da Providência and Canudos settlements, the dynamics of war, the people's survival, and the lack of social justice. To some extent, his engagement with Morro da Providência's community as a social activist is crucial to not forget his roots as a *favelado*. Moreover, due to the government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 outbreak in Brazil, which has dramatically affected the people of the favela, he has been auctioning photographs of the aforementioned exhibition through his Instagram account with the aim of donating the collected money to his community.

Visual and Textual Contestation of the Favela's Media Representation

Media representation of the favelas has perpetuated the circulation of stigmatized images that link urban peripheries with violence, poverty, and race. Similarly, Erika Robb Larkins claims that the real favela is forced to imitate the hyperreal version portrayed by the media to be seen as authentic. The hyperreal version "distorts and simplifies the lives of people" (84) and restricts the options to represent themselves more accurately. As I have argued in this article, Hora's work and Diniz's interpretation precisely seek to contest this misrepresentation by using visual media to offer perspectives disregarded from the hyperreal version of the favela.

This representation also depicts children as naturally violent, a stereotype prominently portrayed by the movie *City of God* (Larkins 94). In this regard, it seems relevant to quote one passage of *Morro da Favela* which debates this misconception when Hora describes the criminalization of an eight-year-old kid that was randomly murdered by the police inside the favela (Figure 8). A seven-panel sequence unfolds the story of Carlinho, a child killed amidst crossfire while he was going to church, after visually depicting how the police exchanged his bible for a gun. By adding this episode, Diniz problematizes the common practice of relating children from the favela to a criminal background. In an attempt to contest the media's representation of the favela's reality, this passage—without using words—manages to dispute preconceived understandings that derive from what Larkins describes as the "hyperreal favela" (84-85).

Different from *Morro da Favela*, Diniz and Brazilian artist Laudo Ferreira depict the hyperreal favela in *Olimpo Tropical* (2017).[14] This graphic narrative features a fictional favela through which the story of Biúca is told, a favela-born, disabled teenager who dreams of becoming a major criminal to fulfill his alleged destiny. In many ways, Biúca echoes Sandro do Nascimento, a young man from Rio de Janeiro whose

14 Published in 2017 in Portugal by Polvo, and in Brazil by Selo Jupati Books and Marsupial publishers. In 2019, the Polish version was published by Wydawnictwo Mandioca editions.

Figure 8. "Sequence of the Criminalization of an Eight-Year-Old Kid Murdered by the Police."
André Diniz, *Morro da Favela*, 2nd ed., 26-27.

attempt to mug a bus ended in a hostage situation that was broadcast on live television. According to Hamburger, Sandro "became a hostage of the character that he embodied" (8) because he recreated a role that fits the stereotypes the viewers believed in and for which they undoubtedly saw him as a criminal kid. Biúca, a frightened, conflicted, and unexperienced criminal teenager, is killed while doing his job as the favela's watchman after confronting the police and preventing them from entering the hill. Similar to Sandro, Biúca plays the role that society expects of him. By doing so, the construction of this fictional character facilitates the fixation of social stereotypes reproduced by the media.

In contrast, *Morro da Favela* challenges these stereotypes of urban peripheries precisely because it is based on Maurício Hora's personal memories, on a voice from within the favela.[15] The fictional basis for the favela "Olimpo Tropical" and its characters is crucial for why this artistic approach does not fulfill the purpose of breaking away from stereotypes of crime, poverty, and violence to the same extent. Nonetheless, I would like to show how despite this fundamental difference from *Morro da Favela*, Ferreira and Diniz manage to formulate a critique of the structural violence that perpetuates the endless cycle of social, political, and economic discrimination in Brazil's urban peripheries. Unlike Carlinho, who is criminalized by the police by putting a gun in his hand after his death in *Morro da Favela*, Biúca becomes an instrument to maintain the *status quo*. Hence, *Olimpo Tropical* critically underscores the dynamics of power between the police and the drug lords of the favelas whose impacts and tragic consequences usually affect young *favelados* who serve merely as a means to an end.

A key aspect that explains, above all, the wide circulation, reception, and the international translations of *Morro da Favela*, is its didactic tone. The graphic narrative offers a historical and linguistic framework that makes it an instructive and accessible object for different types of readerships, not least because the specific language of the comic facilitates translations that also include passages about the social and cultural dynamics within the favela. For instance, the first page of *Morro da Favela*'s first Brazilian edition lists various meanings of the term favela. Following these definitions, a brief historical contextualization is provided to clarify the origins of this first settlement, which dates back to the Canudos War in the nineteenth century. In addition, throughout the graphic narrative there are further explanations of specific terms related to the social dynamics within the favela as well as cover pages inserted before each of its seven parts, all with a specific memory or comment by Maurício Hora printed in white letters on a black background, introducing each chapter in a very personal way. Hora's comments and reflections also frequently refer to the specific and discriminatory terminology used for the favela and its inhabitants. His definition of "bandido" can be read as a critique of the structural violence that perpetuates the reciprocal and thus not clearly separable power relations between criminals and the

15 Edward King uses Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memories" to illustrate the process of negotiation and distribution of memory discourse of the favelas that result from the intersection between individual and collective memories. Specifically, he reflects on how *Morro da Favela* critically intertwines Hora's memories and collective memories of the favelas circulating in mass media narratives (226-27).

police: "The violence is absurd from whichever side it comes from. The violence is only one" (Diniz 31).[16] However, while the violence in *Olimpo Tropical* is graphic and explicit, in *Morro da Favela* Diniz prefers the use of didactic and reflexive components in order to engage with the cultural context of the Brazilian urban periphery in a more sensitive and direct way via Hora's voice.

Conclusion

In a recent interview, when asked about the importance of the graphic narrative for himself and for the favela, Maurício Hora replied: "To me, it gives self-esteem and seriousness to what I say; to the favela, it gives affirmation and legitimacy to the story that History does not tell" (Cleto).[17] Hora's form of counter-archiving Morro da Providência through photography serves as a mode of visual resistance which Diniz transposes in his visual remediation of Hora's selected life-passages.

The medium of *Morro da Favela* is key to reenact Hora's social activism. Particularly the use of white and black colors, the visual construction of spaces, the nuances of the biographical components and the childhood perspective, the linguistic and historical elements, as well as the didactic tone that fuels its potential to be translated, contribute—in this specific combination—to overthrow the favela's stereotypes that have been replicated through the media. The relationships between the poetics and aesthetics of this graphic narrative as a visual artifact that remediates Hora's life and work incarnate a possibility to represent Brazilian urban peripheries detached from misconceptions that frame them as places full of violence, drugs, criminality, racial biases, and poverty.

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16 "A violência é absurda, vinda de qualquer um dos lados. A violência é uma só" (31). It is possible to connect this statement with the 1970s Brazilian slogan "A cidade é uma só" 'The city is only one' from the campaign *Erradicação das Invasões* (Erradication of Invasions)—whose implications are discussed in the docufiction *A cidade é uma só?* (2013) by Adirley Queirós.

17 "Para mim ele dá uma auto-estima e seriedade ao que eu falo e para favela [sic] ele dá afirmação e legitimidade à história que a História não conta."

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"It will be a thing of Joy and Beauty"[1]: Angel Symbolism in *The Brownies' Book* (1920-1921)

Verena Laschinger

Abstract

This essay examines the strategic use of photographs in *The Brownies' Book,* the first magazine for, about, and (partly) by African American children. Edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, Augustus Granville Dill, and Jessie Fauset, *The Brownies' Book* (*TBB*) appeared between January 1920 and December 1921. Designed specifically to counter the demeaning depictions of African Americans (both visual and textual) that commonly circulated U.S. mainstream culture at the time, *TBB* made a particular effort to represent their audience in a positive and empowering light. In close readings of two cover images that depict Black children as angels, I will interrogate the politics and poetics of photography in *The Brownies' Book*. I argue that to combat racism *TBB* strategically transforms the figure of the angelic child, a staple of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel and White by default. Idealizing the Black child as an angel, *TBB* challenges White hegemonic use of angel iconography by marshaling composition, style, form, and technological process. As a result, *TBB*'s trailblazing iconographic intervention did help to visually afford innocence to Black children but failed to establish the Black child-angel as an emblem of racial uplift. In today's visual register it emblematizes, instead, the innocent *victim*.

Key Words: *The Brownies' Book*; photography; children's magazine; angel symbolism; #BlackLivesMatter

> To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep.
>
> James Baldwin

In a 1920 essay entitled "The Immortal Child," American social scientist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) stated, "All our problems center in the child," and "all our hopes, our dreams are for our children" (*Dark-*

[1] This is a line from the October 1919 issue of *The Crisis*, the magazine's so-called "Children's Number," in which W.E.B. Du Bois outlines his ideas for *The Brownies' Book* ("The True Brownies" 286).

water 212-13). Convinced that "children are the future" (212), he advised in another text what he believed was the supreme means to combat racism and create a better future: "the Training of Children, black even as white" (4). In that same year, Du Bois (with Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, and business manager Augustus Granville Dill) launched *The Brownies' Book* (*TBB*), a magazine specifically for, about, and (partly) by African American children.**2** DuBois would later write in his autobiography that *TBB* became "one effort toward which I look back with infinite satisfaction" (*Dusk* 136). Today, scholars unanimously praise what Du Bois himself thought was "really a beautiful publication" (136). Valerie Williams-Sanchez considers it "a thoughtfully crafted artifact that was a cornerstone in the radical reformation of an emergent social class known as the "New Negro" (3). Christina Schäffer finds it "a harbinger of the Harlem Renaissance which helped to shape the movement rather than be shaped by it" (439), with "each issue of *The Brownies' Book* [being] an autonomous piece of art" (450). Patricia Young applauds the technical finesse as "*TBB* was produced using some of the latest print technology of its time. It incorporated text, photographs, sketches, and color tints at a time in history when technological ingenuity was not associated with African Americans" (2). Shawn Leigh Alexander writes of *TBB*:

> In the hands of Fauset's "capacious aesthetic" children read about black history, were whisked away to fantastic worlds of fairy tales, encountered religious worlds that engaged the occult, and found news snippets of world affairs. The work of young writers graced the pages of *The Brownies' Book* and, in a move reminiscent of *The Crisis*, artwork and illustrations struck the imaginations of the magazine's young readers. Ultimately, the superlative efforts behind *The Brownies' Book*, not unlike *The Crisis*' efforts for adults, inculcated young readers with a sense of dignity, place, imagination, and personhood often denied to them in the world of the early twentieth century. (11)

The Brownies' Book appeared as a monthly periodical between January 1920 and December 1921, and made a particular effort to represent African Americans in a positive light to counter the grotesque stereotypes circulating within U.S. mainstream culture at the time. Addressing all "Kiddies from Six to Sixteen" but especially "*ours*, 'the Children of the Sun,'" *TBB* aimed to empower and promote racial pride in its readers.**3** In "The True Brownies," the October 1919 editorial of *The Crisis,* Du Bois announces that *TBB* "seeks to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk—black and brown and yellow and white" (286).

To the social scientist it is imperative that "we are and must be interested in our children above all else, if we love our race and humanity" (Du Bois, "The True Brownies" 285). Yet the ramifications of his conceptualizing children "as active social participants" remain yet to be fully investigated (Smith, "Childhood" 799).**4** Only in the field of children's literature—somewhat sequestered away in a special interest section for female scholars—has the "fact" that "the renowned intellectual

[…] devoted his time and attention to the younger generation and their education" not been "greatly neglected" (Schäffer 447). Children's literature researchers have long argued for the general relevance and impact of *TBB*, warranting further research on Du Bois's political and artistic investment in "the child."

Violet J. Harris, for example, attests to "the radical nature of *The Brownies' Book*" due to its being "deliberately and overtly political" (45). Dianne Johnson considers *TBB* "progressive in terms of promoting a diasporic frame of reference" (10). Her paean of praise continues: "It is not an overstatement to say that the very existence of *The Brownies' Book* precipitated the development of the body of work now called African American children's literature, in all its subsequent manifestations and meanings" (37). Michelle H. Phillips agrees that "Du Bois's intervention in the arena of children's literature is historically remarkable" (590). In 2001, Kory Fern highlights Du Bois's knack for fairy tales (91). In *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas extends Fern's claim, conceding that *TBB* is "a predecessor to Afrofuturism and other forms of Black speculation" (Oeur).

Through close readings of magazine covers depicting Black children as angels, I will interrogate the politics and poetics of photography in *TBB*,[5] thus tying in with Amy Helene Kirschke, who finds that visual imagery is "integral to [Du Bois's] political program" (49), and Julie Taylor, who surmises that "the sophisticated use of photography" in *The Crisis* and *TBB* "provides African American children with access to a cult of childhood that would allow them to be recognized as precious and vulnerable" (747). More precisely, I claim that, to combat racism, *TBB* strategically transforms the figure of the angelic child, a staple of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel and White by default. Idealizing the Black child as an angel, *TBB* formally challenges the White hegemonic use of angel iconography by marshaling composition, style, form, and technological process. *TBB*'s trailblazing iconographic intervention did, in fact, help to visually afford innocence to Black children but failed to establish the Black child-angel as an emblem of racial uplift. In today's visual register it instead emblematizes the innocent *victim*.

Compared, for example, with Aaron Douglas's Art-Deco-style covers of *The Crisis*, *TBB*'s angel covers appear as nostalgic reinvocations of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. I will show, however, that they also employ modernist visual aesthetics to simultaneously signify (in Henry Louis Gates's sense of the term) anachronistic Victorian-age iconography while offering the visually idealized child as a role model to "the magazine's central reader and protagonist, the youngest of New Negroes, who will bear the mantle of change" (Smith, *Children's Literature* xiii). The angel covers encapsulate *TBB*'s politicization of children in modernist stylistic bravado whose impact on the Harlem Renaissance Williams-Sanchez poignantly describes: "Articulate and egalitarian, the images in *TBB* sought not simply to innovate, but rather to incorporate,

carry forward, and impact the visual language of the emerging 'New Negro' into a visual linguistic expression" (18). The visual linguistics remain operative to this day in the antiracist campaigns of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Little Swan, Black Angel

In *TBB*, "visual representations took the form of sketches, photographs, colored illustrations, and tinted photography," Young explains. "Cover pages contained images of Black children or Black art" (11). Angels appear on several covers of *TBB*, most prominently on the inaugural January 1920 issue (Figure 1). It features a Black girl in ballet clothes who looks like an angel, representing "in several ways the epitome of a Western ideal" as Dianne Johnson explains (20). Everything about her "is white, from her soul to her costume" (20). Johnson waves aside the notion that the reproduction of Cornelius Marion Battey's photograph on *TBB*'s cover depicts assimilationist desire: "An angel, regardless of his or her adornment, is just that—an angel, and therefore a being who stands in a special relationship to God" (21). To Johnson, only this relationship counts along with its symbolic meaning: "What is indicated is goodness, purity, and the striving towards an ideal. It cannot be assumed simply that whiteness is associated automatically with these qualities in every context and always in direct opposition to blackness" (21).

Yet, since William Wordsworth and "hosts of other writers inflated the angelic child into a kind of saviour" (Wood 117), the epitomal figure of innocence in the Victorian Christian tool-kit codified Whiteness as both the icon and the medium for the soul's "special relationship with God" (117). The "centrality of whiteness in Western visual culture," as Coco Fusco summarizes the central idea of Richard Dyer's *White*, "depends on Christian ideas about incarnation and embodiment, specifically the notion that white people are *more than* bodies" (36; emphasis in original). In contrast, Black people are often demeaned as *nothing but* bodies. Angels stand in for the assumption that "what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual indeed ethereal qualities" (Dyer 127).

Launching *TBB*'s inaugural issue with the visual fanfare of a Black child-angel on the cover was thus a bold move in the 1920s United States, where "it was a standing rule that no Negro portrait was to appear" (Du Bois, *Dusk* 136). The image can be read as assimilationist, as Johnson does, or characteristic of Du Bois's agenda of "uplift suasion," which in turn upsets a contemporary like Kendi as "not only racist" but also "impossible for Blacks to execute" (*Stamped* 125). And yet, one might also argue in favor of the image's complex antiracist message. Its angel iconography seeks to assert African American equality, but by signifying upon an iconography that functions to naturalize White supremacy, *TBB* not only asserted Black children's humanity, it also exposed what is "human and humanly flawed" in everyone (*Stamped* 125).

Figure 1. cover page of *The Brownies' Book* January 1920, Online Image. *Library of Congress, From the Rare Book and Special Collections Division.* Downloaded March 17, 2021. http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=rbc3&fileName=rbc0001_2004ser01351page.db.

"Never before had a magazine for children shown a beautiful black child on its cover or even evoked the association of a black child being an angel" (Schäffer 60). A synecdoche for all the other children featured in the magazine, the African American child angel on *TBB*'s first cover was as revolutionary as it would become programmatic. I agree with Johnson that the image exemplifies exactly the qualities of angel iconography: purity, spirituality, cleanliness, virtue, along with beauty

and goodness. Captured with her arms raised high above her head and slightly forward, her fingers spread with palms turned toward the camera, the girl, quite literally, seems about to reach out and claim these qualities for herself.

Wearing a spiked crown—a material substitute for an angel's translucent halo as well as a signifier of wealth and power like the pearl necklace and brooch she also wears—the girl also mimics the Statue of Liberty. With open arms, she welcomes the magazine's young readers to enter *TBB*'s "golden door" and experience uplift and liberation, and the readers are cast as "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (Lazarus) as *TBB* invites them to pursue freedom and happiness in their own country.

Lastly, the girl is presented in the role of the little swan. *En pointe* with her arms in ballet's fifth arm positions, she gleefully smiles into the camera, signaling pride, ambition, even triumph. Because the little ballerina is not yet trained to perfection, her hand position does not look graceful (nor truly welcoming), a childish mishap for sure but also a suggestive photographic detail that complicates *TBB*'s visual message on several levels.

The cover image references Du Bois's concept of training, aiming to groom the young into a "carefully bred, selected, and trained elite" representative of the "'New' Negro who will succeed in the modern world" (English 44).[6] Advertising the benefits of training, the cover image of the young ballerina opposes racist views of Black inferiority that allegedly results from biological difference. Such pseudoscientific claims circulated freely in the 1920s, prompting so-called experts to voice outrageous assumptions. "John Martin who became America's first major dance critic when he joined the *New York Times* in 1927," for example, "reasoned that for Blacks, the ability to dance was 'intrinsic' and 'innate.' They had natural 'racial rhythm,' and struggled to learn the more technical dance styles, such as ballet" (Kendi, *Stamped* 327). The cover puts *TBB*'s mission to counter such defamatory nonsense into visual terms. Given a chance and the support, it says, this girl is as apt as any amateur to finesse her technique by continually practicing as she grows up, because any child regardless of the color of her skin can excel in that to which she devotes her time and talent. This message is brought across by the photograph's signifying upon the performance of Whiteness.

Dressed up in full ballet attire with a white cape that looks like wings and a crown just like the Statue of Liberty, the girl on the cover is staged ostentatiously as liberty goddess, angel, and ballerina simultaneously. She mimics the figure of the ideal White woman who is herself constructed as "translucent, incorporeal" in "the Romantic ballet," as she weightlessly dances on the tips of her toes (Dyer 130-31). The cover girl's aspirational foray into a cultural sphere that is open exclusively for slender White women commissioned to construct nothing less than angelic Whiteness was an affront in the 1920s United States, excusable only due to the child's gender and young age.

6 Daylanne English criticizes Du Bois's eugenic photo galleries of NAACP prize babies in *The Crisis*: "From about 1900 to 1930," she argues, "uplift took on a more disturbing quality as the period's notions of racial improvement (for both white and black people) became ever more tightly entwined with the emerging science of genetics" (36).

Forgiven or not, the color line had been crossed so that the child's (adorable) plumpness and masquerade ironically play on the ballerina on stage. Such irony exposes her iconic Whiteness as a performance, too, as nothing but the result of more rigorous training. Even more revealing in this regard is the girl's botched hand position, a clawing gesture which, intentional or not, disrupts the ballerina's picture-perfect performance. The intervention is bold because the ethereal Whiteness constructed by Romantic ballet is revealed as substantial, corporeal, and racialized. Once Whiteness is seen as a racial performance, though, it can no longer "function as a human norm" (Dyer 1), and Blackness, in turn, can no longer be considered an aberrance. With visual semantics thus challenged, habitual signification is suspended. The girl on the cover is not seen only as Black. Liberated from the specter of racialization, she can simply be a child who loves ballet.[7]

There are more technical aspects to be mentioned which support the image's subversion of iconic Whiteness. First of all, the portrait performs what Dyer, on a different account, calls a mobilization of "the polarity between black and white" (116). The girl is photographed against a studio backdrop that is almost completely black except for the shimmering contours of a tree and wild growths, suggesting a landscape painting of the American wilderness. Her white attire, placed at the center of the image, shines brightly. This is a typical effect of "chiaroscuro," which is "a key feature of the representation of whiteness" (115). The white dress and the black backdrop are further contrasted with the girl's brown skin. According to graphic design scholar Anne Galperin, the cover is "an instance of two-color printing. First, the plate with black ink (for the image in greyscale and the type), then another plate carefully registered with just the girl's arms and face in a second color of ink," which "is a bit out of registration as seen at the armhole of her dress on the left." The digitally archived copy of *TBB* suggests, as Galperin explains in an email conversation with the author, that the cover image was "processed as a halftone," and that the cover was likely "printed on a smaller letterpress (older technology for that time) and the interior of the magazine offset printed."

In other words, the cover image was printed with the most advanced technology available at the time, to ostentatiously enhance the coloration of the girl's skin. As a result, the dialectics of Black and White are dissolving. Depicting three colors—black, white, and brown—*TBB*'s cover can be considered a political statement in favor of diversity and of a country choosing to identify as predominantly mixed-raced. Coloring the girl's skin brown is also a special nod to the eponymous fairy characters of *The Brownies' Book*, which are themselves symbols of the variously colored child-readers of the magazine.

The technical quality of the cover is a testament to the skills of both the unidentified printer and the famous photographer C. M. Battey.[8] Especially in light of the fact that the technology was, as Dyer contends,

7 In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein sets out how Black children were denied the status of children in the nineteenth century with a focus on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Epitomizing innocence, the angelic child, Eva, is contrasted with Topsy, the stereotypical pickaninny, who is too dehumanized and amoral to be recognizable as a child. As Eva becomes the cipher for innocence beyond the slaveholding South and far into the twentieth century, the child becomes White by default.

8 Battey's excellence was representative of many other Black photographers. The legacy of African American photographers, thoroughly documented and researched by Deborah Willis, begins in 1840 when "Jules Lion (1810-1866), first introduced the daguerreotype process to the city of New Orleans" (Introduction xv). In his lead and despite "pervasive racial discrimination," Willis states, "hundreds of free men and women of color established themselves as professional artists and daguerreotypists during the first twenty-five years of photography's existence" and "began to record the essence of their communities mainly through portraiture" (xvi). Portrait photography quickly became a tool "to resist misrepresentation," and the camera persistently sustains the political struggle for racial equality, bell hooks writes in "In Our Glory" (60).

"developed with white people in mind […] so much so that photographing non-white people is typically construed as a problem" (89). Du Bois was full of praise for Battey, who had been head of the photography department at Tuskegee Institute since 1916. Battey excels where "[t]he average white photographer" fails (Du Bois, "Opinion" 249). The latter, Du Bois continues, "does not know how to deal with colored skins and having neither sense of the delicate beauty of tone nor will to learn, […] makes a horrible botch of portraying them" (249).

The girl's face, arms, and neckline are beautifully and strategically enhanced during mechanical reproduction of the original photograph, which might have already been hand-engraved and colorized according to the fashion at the time. Regardless of such speculations on the original, and despite technical enhancement in the printed version, we can see that Battey carefully crafted the colors and contrasts during the photographic procedure in the studio. I disagree with Taylor, who claims that the girl is artificially colored "by a rich brown tint," and thus "denaturalized," because "the technology available cannot capture the girl's skin colour" (751), giving the photographer more credit instead. By enhancing local contrast yet leaving otherwise intact the large-scale contrast scheme of the image, Battey lets the human figure at the center appear three-dimensional. "Backlighting," Dyer explains, also helps to keep a "figure separate from the background," while giving "a sense of depth to the image" (115).

Such separation pronounces the girl as different from the dark landscape in the background which likely suggests the American wilderness, or the so-called dark continent (Africa) in front of and against which she is set. As the darkness behind her fails to envelop the girl and render her bare skin indistinguishable, the racist stereotype that devalues African American people as "naturally wild" and "beastlike" by collapsing them with nature is visually challenged. Blackness is neither monochromatic nor monolithic but inherently varied in the picture, thus dislodging the dialectics of Black and White and complicating visual semantics.

Secondly, by shooting with Rembrandt lighting, Battey illuminates one side of the girl's face while the other remains dark except for a small inverted triangle of light on the cheek. This effective play with light and shadow adds drama to the composition but, more importantly, it makes one side of the girl's face glow. Such glowing is a photographic effect achieved, at the time, exclusively with White women. As Dyer elaborates, the correct use of light is imperative for the construction of Whiteness in photographs: "Idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls onto them from above. In short, they glow." Portrayed by lesser skilled photographers, Black skin tends to shine instead of glow due to "light bouncing back off the surface of the skin" (122).

Battey expertly handles both the "overall and figure lighting" (125) so that the human figure and the background are distinguishable while

the girl's face and arms become the focus of the photograph. Battey re-defines beauty standards by reconciliating light and shade in a way that is effective on Black skin only. Instead of exaggerating transparency to the detriment of substance, as is often the case in photographs of White women, Battey manages to administer glow both to the girl's body and her clothing, the white dress, cape, shoes, and tights—the props of her angel impersonation. Highlighting the Black body and the angel ac-coutrements, so that Black equals White, is a photographic balancing act playfully matched by the girl's skillful stance on the tips of her toes.

Furthermore, Battey photographs the girl from slightly below so that the forward-bending reach of her arms and hands comes out even stron-ger, giving it more of a thrust toward the viewer. The angle from which she is seen provides agency to the girl whose action already speaks of ambition. Contrary to a professional ballerina who, being "all legs" has also been constructed as an object of desire by Romantic ballet which "produced both the most ethereal stage aesthetic and the sex show" (Dyer 131), the prepubescent girl on the cover of the children's maga-zine has her upper body, head, and hands, spotlighted. Her feisty hand gesture can be read as signaling defiance—against racist slurs as well as voyeuristic appropriation. This potentially threatening message is again mellowed by her young age while also empowering all children—but especially Black girls—precisely because of the girl's young age and im-provable ballet technique.

The message of the child-angel on the cover of *TBB*'s inaugural issue is loud and clear. The little imperfections of the young ballerina encour-age other children to be ambitious and hardworking in order to excel at what they choose to be doing. This way, they will make an impact like Du Bois or Battey did in their respective fields, thanks to whose sophis-tication and technical finesse *TBB* turned out as "a cultural and tech-nological marvel" (Young 12). Read as signifying upon the ballerina's performance of ideal Whiteness, the hand gesture also expresses *TBB*'s claim on all the good things White America denies to African Ameri-can children. With style, technique, and composition carefully attended to, Battey's image of the African American girl formally signals this "in-dividual's place in society," which, Brian Wallis argues, is the key func-tion of the photographic portrait (178). Her stance and defiant gesture add some antiracist spice to the magazine's nonconfrontational agenda of uplift, thus making the girl a model for "the next generation of free-dom fighters" (Alexander 11).

Black Cherubs, Blank Page

TBB's April 1921 cover again depicted a Black child as an angel (Fig-ure 2). More precisely, it showed two slightly different headshots of what could be the same child or identical twins. The kid on the cover is Yvette Keelan, "granddaughter of lecturer and activist Mary Burnett Talbert,"

who "hosted the first meeting of the Niagara movement, forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in her Buffalo, New York, home in 1905" (Gates and Tatar 277). The page layout established a narrative that pertained to the child's family heritage of racial activism, thus indicating the emergence of a new generation of race leaders.
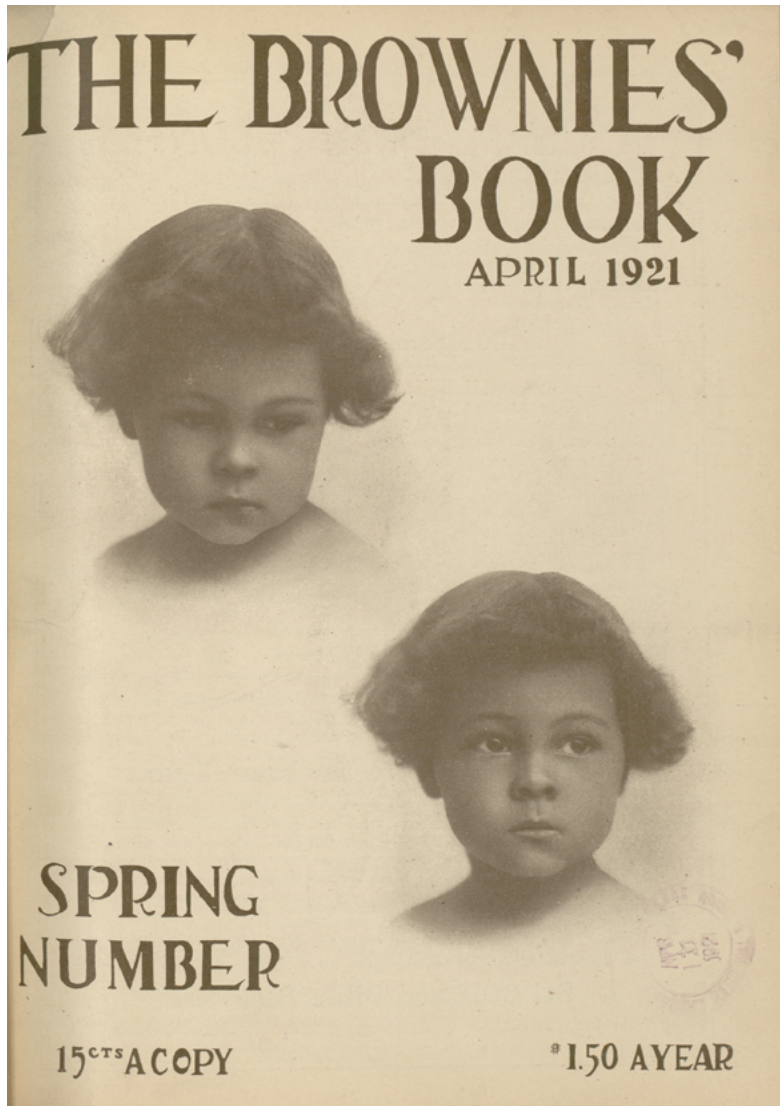
The close-ups of Yvette's head, extracted from the original photographs and free-form selected onto the page, are placed one below and more to the right from the other so that the child appears to be looking down onto her doubled self. Read from left to right, the visual narrative is literally one of uplift as her demeanor changes from sullen, with head bent and eyes downcast in the upper left image, to hopeful in the picture below. Here she holds her head up high, looking into the far and away with eyes wide open and brows raised expectantly. Given Yvette's light complexion and texture of her wavy hair, this short image-text sequence can also be understood as commentary on the "tragic mulatta," a stock character of the nineteenth-century American literature where the mixed-race character is portrayed as notoriously unhappy and bound to commit suicide because neither community fully accepts her as their own. She is, in short, an "emblem of victimization" (Raimon 7). Thanks to *TBB*'s choice in layout, photographic imagery, typography, and coloration, which formally facilitate the message of liberation and amalgamation, the light-skinned child on the cover seems to look into a brighter future than the fictional cliché was ever granted.

Compared with the ballerina depicted on the cover of the inaugural issue, the child of the April 1921 issue sports significant differences. Yvette is considerably younger and, befitting a specific category of angel, she can neither be readily recognized as a girl nor African American. Unlike Battey's carefully staged studio photograph, the original portraits from which Yvette's cut-out head has been salvaged could just as well be snapshots adhering to a photographic convention employed with younger children and babies:

> Over the course of the nineteenth century, photographic depictions of children shifted from emphasizing their importance as familial heirs to picturing them as individual objects of sentiment, while other popular cultural renderings made ideal children into becurled and dimpled cherubs. (Pearson 345)

Joad Raymond explains the biblical meaning of cherubim as "worldly angels who guard the gates of Eden (Genesis 3:24)" (265). They are of higher rank, yet, in principle, resemble other angel figures, all of which, Amira El-Zein contends, "are good, beautiful, universal, and eternally obedient to God. There is no paradox, no contradiction in their nature" (x-xi). "Simply put," they are "'divine messengers' and beings of light" whose purpose it is to bring "peace and quietude" (xi). Raymond lists their characteristics in more detail: angels "praise God"; they are "messengers and ambassadors" as well as "'ministering spirits,' working God's business on Earth" (85). Furthermore, they are "witnesses" (86). Finally, "angels heal" (86), but they can also be "harbingers of the apocalypse" (90).

In the context of *TBB*'s modernist aesthetics, which are effects of graphic design, the cherubs' message on the cover is considerably less sentimentalist and simple. As a result, the "magazine gets to have it both

ways, including," Taylor reasons, "the black child within the sentimental register while also suggesting the perversity of this category" (758). The cherubs, who are "naturally, rhetorical beings, and choose their styles, tropes, and figures to suit the occasion" (Raymond 275), are afforded with the additional function of reflecting on the magazine as a modern medium.

In contrast to the angel ballerina whose rendering deconstructs Whiteness as performance, the cherubs "retain the figure's fundamental mystique" (Gilbert 253). They are recast in keeping with their traditional iconography as "disembodied spirits," "luminous beings" and "shape-shifters" (El-Zein 47-48). The difference in representation is significant because the cherubs assume meaning mainly as harbingers of change. Espousing an anticipatory temporality, the cherubs announce a new age, a message that also affects the messenger. To put it in the words of Michel Serres: "Messengers disappear in relation to their message: this is our key to understanding their death agonies, their death and their disaggregation" (80). *TBB*'s cover mediates the angels' disaggregation (and along with it their nineteenth-century sentimentalist message) and reemergence as modern media, or even information technology, where Serres believes them omnipresent.

Let me elaborate on how the double effect of disaggregation and reemergence is formally mediated on the April 1921 cover, playing out both in political and medial terms. The soft lower edges of Yvette's double portrait effect a feathery frizzled look that lets the child's shoulders merge with the light background of the page. From the blankness that surrounds them, it seems as if the heads of two almost indistinguishable child-angels emerge from the ether. Surfacing only up to their necks and with the physical substance of their lower bodies rendered invisible or absent, they seem suspended in the air, possibly kept airborne by a pair of wings. The pretty, baby-faced heads seem to belong to incorporeal, heavenly creatures. Rendered sexless and looking almost identical, each cherub equally and interchangeably signifies innocence which "foil to adults' knowingness," according to the symbolism "derived from representations of putti in art and of the Christ-child in literature" (Wood 117). Their light complexion makes them racially indeterminable, adding another factor to their symbolic condition as pristine and innocent.

Like other angelic children, the cherubs function to exert "redemptive force upon the adults," Black and White, who just by looking at them let drop—such was the hope—all bad intention and action as they are loved and shamed "into good behaviour" (Wood 119). Taylor states that "the innocent, vulnerable, sentimental child" has its "own particular political value" as "a counter to the racist image of the pickaninny" (739). Given Du Bois's programmatic indictment of what Naomi Wood calls "a culture that may idealize 'the Child,' but fails to protect children who fall short" by not being White (121), *TBB*'s African American cherubs are visual means of antiracist persuasion. As Du Bois "maintained

his faith that American racism could be persuaded and educated away" (Kendi, *Stamped* 276-77), the reasoning implicit to the cover would go like this: In the face, literally, of such sweet African American children, the racist White, or self-hating Black reader, realizes the absurdity of racial prejudice and is persuaded into giving it up and letting it vanish into the ether. Absorbed and dissolved by the emptiness that surrounds the cherubs, the cover image visually mobilizes blank space as a medium, a "conduit to salvation" (119).

The medial function adds to the obvious meaning of the blank space on *TBB*'s cover which, like the cherub figure itself, is imbued with racial semantics. Surrounding the cherubs on the material page like a white frame, the blank space symbolizes the racist environment in which African American children live. Du Bois for whom "all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists" ("Criteria" 296), would not have a commissioned artist employ blanks solely for their stylistic effect. Given that by 1921 the *page blanche* was not only a standard inventory of modernist poetics but a particularly malleable "cipher open to a variety of procedures and semantics" (Schneider 22-23; my translation), artists of the Harlem Renaissance make blank space work to both political and aesthetic ends.[9] For *TBB*'s cover, they do so in doubly complex ways—as index, the blank space around the cherubs signifies not only oppression by but also liberation from racism. As a medium, it facilitates both the angel's disappearance and modern media's emergence.

Adopting the sentimentalized Victorian iconography of the child angel, the nineteenth-century association of the *page blanche* with transcendental Whiteness is willy-nilly referenced, too. However, as the color white cannot signify an unadulterated state of innocence in the political context of Jim Crow and from an African American perspective, a warm sepia tone is chosen for the blank space on *TBB*'s cover. Another change in color-coding is made for the typeface. Instead of black, brown lettering is used for the heading, price, and volume information that frame the blank space and portrait composition on the top and bottom of the page. *TBB* uses "colored tints, particularly on the front covers, and almost always for the sole purpose of representing skin colour" (Taylor 751).

Both sides to the left and right remain, however, unframed by lettering, so that the blank space in the mid-section reaches all the way to the edges of the material page that forms the cover's outer frame. Given the use of angel symbolism, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the design references a spiritual order with the inner framing on the top and bottom signifying the sanctity of heaven and earth, whereas the open space in-between signifies possibilities. It also warrants change of the social and political condition of African Americans, of a dysfunctional system. This claim is further sustained by the placing of the photographs that mobilizes a narrative image-text sequence. Its dynamism expresses

9 The blank space on the cover of *TBB* is characteristic of the U.S.-American cultural and political context. Yet, the implications of race and gender for cultural practices and discourses are far less insignificant and more generally pervasive than Lars Schneider's study suggests. To analyze the work of seven White male Modernists who are all but one (Herman Melville) based in France (a former colonial power) without even so much as a nod to race and gender politics constitutes itself a blank.

the vitality of "new race leaders," a vital force to be reckoned with and ideally represented by a very young child cherub.

TBB's April 1921 cover page is only a detail, yet one that encapsulates the modernist poetics of what Du Bois dubbed "Negro Art" ("Criteria" 290). Unlike other modernist poetics, it does not "highlight the signifier to the detriment of the signified" (Schneider 199; my translation). The cover page is both an aesthetic object and a piece of political propaganda. Its design adheres to a spiritual order in the way that it frames the top and bottom of the page. In leaving the blank space in the mid-section unframed, however, it breaks with traditions in typically modernist fashion. The form of the cut-out photographic images is roundish, and the photos are freely arranged on the page but in an order whose dynamic effect is true to modernism's desire for the new. In terms of both form and content, the cover page is expressive of modernism's "*esprit nouveau*," a new spirit open to medial enhancements of life and the (social) body (Schneider 140). *TBB* envisions African American children embracing this new spirit as they grow up with self-respect and trained in skills. Uplifted and liberated from the social and emotional constraints of racism, they gain visibility as a new generation of "race leaders" (Smith, "Childhood" 804).

The doubling of the cherub on the cover—a synecdoche for all children addressed by *TBB*—is also significant as it indicates multiplicity. The idea extends to *TBB*'s portrait gallery "Our Little Friends" which showcases "anonymous portraits" (Schäffer 165) of well-groomed, middle-class babies and children. Like their counterparts in *Crisis*, they are chosen out of hundreds of submissions to offer tangible evidence of the Black middle class. With little or no accompanying text, "Our Little Friends" aims not toward particularity but produces a sense of seriality. Like various other scholars before her, Taylor argues that Du Bois's preferred practice of presenting the formal studio portraits in "grid-like arrangements over several whole pages" puts them into close and problematic proximity to typological photographs (738).

The children's portraits are at once generic and specific, self-evident and opaque, signifying simultaneously a racialized type of child (Black) and Du Bois's "immortal child" of no specific color. Harking back to the sentimentalism of family photography, *TBB*'s gallery employs the photographs primarily as portraits not of the nuclear family but of extended kinship. They function to visually affiliate all readers, an "imagined community" of extended kin (Anderson qtd. in Taylor 762) to the New Negro Movement.

While Taylor concludes that "[i]n essence, the photographs become decorative almost as a pattern, or a sort of wallpaper" (762), I wish to point out their resistive function. "Our Little Friends" emulates the abundantly pictured photo walls in Southern Black homes described by bell hooks. Covered in "stylized photographs taken by professional photographers" (59), these photo walls "were sites of resistance. They

constituted private, Black-owned and -operated gallery space where images could be displayed, shown to friends and strangers" (59). hooks reminisces:

> To enter black homes in my childhood was to enter a world that valued the visual, that asserted our collective will to participate in a noninstitutionalized curatorial process. For black folks constructing our identities within the culture of apartheid, these walls were essential to the process of decolonization. In opposition to colonizing socialization, internalized racism, these walls announced our visual complexity. (61)

Like *The Crisis*, *TBB* provides a public forum for this private practice, affiliating in the process all African Americans with the child-angel on the cover who extends her angelic qualities to them. In return, the angel is made obsolete. While the angel's symbolic innocence is employed to prove African American children's humanity and equal rights, the cherubs, "noncompounded beings" to begin with (El-Zein 48), paradoxically announce their disaggregation. Once humanity, flaws and all, is finally credited to everyone without exception, the angel's mediated message has been received. The cherubs can now make room for new media like *TBB* created by and modeled to the demands of the New Negro.

Angel Down

Fitting the season of the year, *TBB*'s "Spring Number" of April 1921 employed blankness as the discursive figuration of a new beginning. Or, such was the hope. Until today, and as long as racist policy[10] continues to make countless African American families mourn the death of their children, the angel despairing to transmit the message of equality cannot disappear. The private photo wall has moved from magazines such as *The Crisis* and *TBB* to social media platforms where Black Lives Matter murals keep visual count of the dead and brutalized. Like the angelic child of nineteenth-century sentimental culture, the African American child-angel has become iconographic inventory by now. As an emblem of the innocent victim and Black by default, it pervades popular culture, the medial outlet of both commodified hope and despair as well as Black Lives Matter's strident call to stop anti-Black police brutality in the United States. This call is echoed by countless activists, including White allies such as Lady Gaga. Ruminating on the death of Trayvon Martin, a teenage victim of anti-Black gun violence, her 2016 song "Angel Down" deploys the African American child-angel, too, begging: "Save that angel, hear that angel, catch my angel" (Lady Gaga).

[10] "Racist policy," defined by Kendi as "any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups" (*Antiracist* 18), plays out in terms of racist terror, concomitant a lack of accountability for those responsible due to a "legal system [that] condones those killings" (Crusto 7), and crass economic disparity.

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A Battle or a Conversation:
Imagining Africa and Its Diaspora
in Beyoncé's *Black Is King* and *Lemonade*

Raphaëlle Efoui-Delplanque

Abstract

In her visual albums *Black Is King* (2020) and *Lemonade* (2016), pop artist Beyoncé engages with audiovisual representation as a way of *rewriting* existing narratives of Blackness and re-presenting the African diaspora and the African continent. The albums navigate a contentious space in which feminist empowerment mingles with sexual objectification and conservative gender roles, oppression is countered by hyper-capitalist consumption, African and Afrodiasporic cultures are mobilized or appropriated, and powerful counter-narratives are made in ways that can seem like hegemony reproduced. In this paper, I argue that a determinant factor of the ability to navigate those complexities is the notion of *community*: its representation, its scope, and its tensions. Both formally and in content, Beyoncé and her co-creators' audiovisual narratives stimulate a reflection on how to make the individual collective, the personal political, and how to unite disparity into "the Black diaspora" as a community and an addressee. Beyoncé's Afrodiasporic projection requires strong authorship and the creation of a unifying myth. The ensuing narrative and profitability imperatives provoke the question whether Beyoncé's visual albums can truly be sites for the envisioning of the African diaspora as a community marked by diversity, tension, and negotiation.

Key Words: African diaspora; music video; counter-narratives; community; translating Blackness

Beyoncé's latest visual album, *Black Is King*, was released in the summer of 2020, as the struggle for Black survival and joy acceded to broader resonance worldwide, reaffirming the need for imagery of Black people outside of racist, White supremacist representations—if only to counteract the virally shared footage of violent police murders. Perhaps it is

this socio-political imperative that has made discussions of Beyoncé's latest visual albums, *Lemonade* and *Black Is King*, particularly polarized (and polarizing). While *Lemonade* (2016) recounts the intimate stages of Beyoncé's coping with her husband's adultery against a broader context of patriarchal and White supremacist oppression, the second draws on the Disney movie *The Lion King* to tell the story of a young Black prince—and by extension, an entire diaspora—who must find the genuine meaning of community and kin(g)ship. In both of these seemingly very different stories we can find attempts to unite what are, to some, irreconcilable positions: mingling feminist empowerment with hypersexualized female bodies and conservative gender roles, references to the Black Panthers with emancipation through accumulation of capital, and Afrodiasporic pride with cultural appropriation. Each of these points has been widely discussed online and, in *Lemonade*'s case, also in academia. But *Black Is King* added a whole new dimension to the debate and a whole continent to the representation: from *Lemonade*'s focus on the African American (particularly Southern) diaspora, the 2020 album broadens the scope to the African continent as a represented site rather than just a distant metaphor. Beyoncé, who enacts several roles in both albums, is tasked with embodying different meanings of Blackness and unifying them into a common narrative. The varied reception this narrative provoked poses a central question to the representation of, and representativity in, Black cultures: who can represent—that is, depict *and* speak for—the variety of Black cultures, and in what forms? As I seek to show in this article, to think of the role of narration and myth in community-making is one way to shine light on this complex issue. I will begin by offering an account of how multitude and variety (or difference) is an integral part of Beyoncé's visual albums in the treatment of sound and image as well as in the lyrical text. From there, I will illustrate how this multitude is streamlined through mythmaking, which crafts a unified narrative and clear authorship position. I will finally move on to discuss the effects of this narrative (and business) imperative on the representation of the African continent and its relation to "the Black diaspora" that Beyoncé addresses.

Visual Albums and Kaleidoscopic Collaboration

The nomenclature I use most readily in this article, "visual album," is one of many possible terms for the two works at hand, including "sonic cinema" (as *Black Is King* was called in its press release), "concept album," or simply "music video." The term "visual album," first used by Beyoncé's label for the eponymous album, *Beyoncé*, in 2013, is best understood in its genealogy and context. Music videos are increasingly acknowledged as an artistically autonomous genre, with characteristic aesthetics and central figures. Video art, experimental video, and music video are prolific sites of creation for African American artists such as Kahlil Joseph,

originally the sole director of *Lemonade* (Als), allowing for the exploration of nonlinear, polyvocal narrations. The border between music video, cinema, and video art is blurred by many of its central actors: Arthur Jafa, for instance, was a director of photography for Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, which has been recognized as a central influence on *Lemonade*; he was also a cinematographer for *A Seat at the Table* by Beyoncé's sister, Solange Knowles (da Costa). Melina Matsoukas, who has been a director for several of Beyoncé's videos, was also the director of the acclaimed feature *Queen and Slim* (2019). A visual album is marked, as Paula Harper points out, by "a many-part, highly collaborative collection of tracks and videos authored by multiple artists, packaged and sold as a singular entity" (62). This emphasis on collaboration has deeper implications on the perception of Beyoncé as an artist, in the form of a deprecation Birgitta J. Johnson has termed the "collaboration tax" (240). Sparked in particular by internet culture in the wake of the 2015 Grammys, the credits to Beyoncé's visual albums have been at the center of interrogations of her cultural and economic value as an artist. As Will Fulton writes, these discussions oppose "a paradigm of artistry and authenticity against a disdainful example of manufactured pop artifice." Fulton speaks of Beyoncé's "collagist creative practice" as challenging the image of the solitary genius, offering a collaborative creation model (40).

This applies to song composition, writing, as well as the visual imagery: none of *Lemonade*'s seven co-directors act "as an auteur […], except perhaps Knowles-Carter herself. Instead, the cinematographers and filmmakers operate as members of the singer's chorus, wielding their lenses towards her so that she literally vibrates off the screen" (Tinubu 249). In *Black Is King* (*BIK*), in addition to the plethora of musicians involved, three co-writers and a poet are listed in the credits next to Beyoncé, including three writers of African descent whose backgrounds differ greatly: Warsan Shire, a British-Somali, Kenyan-born poet; Yrsa Daley-Ward, another British poet with Jamaican and Nigerian heritage; and Clover Hope, who was born in Guyana and raised in Queens. Put differently, three of the four co-writers of *BIK* are women from the African diaspora whose migration stories, geographical and cultural heritage, as well as distance to the continent vary immensely, offering some insight into the many layers of the African diaspora.

Beyoncé has challenged the boundaries between sound and the visual since her eponymous first visual album release in 2013. In the accompanying five-part documentary, she posits visuals as an essential component of the story told by her music, emphasizing that she *sees* music. In fact, Beyoncé has made several other long audiovisual formats, from *Life Is But a Dream* (2013), the five-part documentary that accompanied *Beyoncé*, to *Homecoming* (2019) and *Making the Gift* (2019). These are autobiographical documentaries and portraits that focus on Beyoncé as an entertainer.

By opposition, the two most recent visual albums allow for the expression of multitude, for which Beyoncé becomes a receptacle in her visual albums. In *Lemonade*, she speaks the private poetry of Warsan Shire into her own intimacy and embodies different Black women across eras; in *BIK*, she plays an omnipresent but shifting spiritual presence (Crumpton). References to the Yoruba orishas, whose worship as intermediate between the human and the spiritual world is present in many Afrodiasporic spiritual traditions, transpire visually in *Lemonade*, and they are picked up explicitly in *BIK*'s lyrics: Beyoncé claims her "Oshun energy" in "Black Parade," and affirms in the voice-over following the track "My Power" that "the orishas hold your hand through this journey." Mounting or channeling an orisha is a particular kind of (visual) representation, marked by giving up agency, which offers "a framework for thinking about reconciling and uniting seemingly contradictory identity cues" (Stewart 27).

The "kaleidoscopic exuberance" that *BIK*'s adherence to "ancient music-video ideas of chaos, incoherence and looks" (Morris et al.) offers is, I argue, the formal mechanism that allows for the representation of multiplicity and non-linear time. A composite form for composite content, the visual album can be, as Michele Prettyman Beverly describes *Lemonade*, "a polyvocal, intertextual field of creative performance" (168); a "cornucopia," a "mixtape-like vision," "unfinished" and leaving space for Black femmes to see themselves as "sisters […] not twins" (Tinsley 14). The visual album, marked by collaboration, thus offers engaging possibilities for bringing about a vision of Blackness as plural yet intertwined, proposing to read the African diaspora as a complex, transtemporal community.

There are notable differences in treatment between *Lemonade* and *BIK*, the former being clearly cut into titled sequences while the latter relies on the original *Lion King* movie for narrative linearity and thus plays with more non-linear structure within it. Visually, the albums draw on the possibilities of experimental filmmaking and music videos, with quick-paced jump-cuts that make for a composite feeling, as well as many juxtapositions of unrelated images with graphical similarities (known as "match cuts") to create association between shots. The interplay between audiovisual synch and non-synch carries a complex and interwoven narrative in which the sampled and cut up audio brings about a conversational element. Listener-viewers had familiarized themselves with this way of collaging audio recordings on *Lemonade,* for instance with the much-noted excerpt from Malcom X's speech on the Black female condition in the United States. *BIK* offers such sampling from its very first minutes: even before the title appears on screen, two voices (neither of which is Beyoncé's) resonate across portraits of Black individuals and across African landscapes and cityscapes. The first voice, seemingly an African American male, states his difficulties to navigate the path toward fulfilling his potential; the second has the cinematic

intonation of a Disney movie and can be identified as an excerpt from Mufasa's speech to Simba in *The Lion King* in which the king-father explains the "delicate balance" that characterizes "the great circle of life." The first two samples are put in conversation, creating the effect that Mufasa responds to the unidentified Black male. Beyoncé's first voice-over, starting after the title display, begins with "Bless the body, born celestial, beautiful in dark matter. Black is the color of my true love's skin." The line does not resonate as being directly part of the conversation. Rather, it presents itself—in true voice-over fashion—at a distance which confers a form of authority and knowledge.

Following this multiplicity in unity, the sonic and musical influences are broad in both albums, drawing on country, dubstep, indie-rock, Afrobeat, contemporary Afropop / Afrobeats, hip-hop, reggae, dancehall, R&B, gospel, and field recordings that flow into one another rather seamlessly, as visual albums generally offer less defined cuts between tracks than a classical album structure. In addition, as Carol Vernallis points out, Beyoncé frequently harmonizes with or doubles her lead vocals in *Lemonade* and in *BIK*.

Along with this polyphonic impression comes the polylingualism present in both albums. The multiplicity of languages present on *BIK* is one of its distinctive features. A track like "My Power" entails lyrics in African American Language (AAL), Nigerian pidgin English, Xhosa, and Zulu. Similarly, the multiplicity of versions of American English utilized by Beyoncé in *Lemonade* points to diversity. Within Beyoncé's English, as Alexis McGee has shown, intersecting identities and discursive communities are expressed in her alternating use of African American Language, African American Women's Language (AAWL)[1] and Standard American English. This works as "a method for Black women's delivery and navigation of multiple discourse communities—both public and private" (58).

Making a Plural and Transtemporal Community

While these elements of sonic, lyrical, and visual treatment primarily display multiplicity, their association provides a discourse on community. Representations of community are central to the narrative of personal and collective healing in *Lemonade*, most visible in the collective tableaux of Black women and collective dance scenes. In *BIK*, this visual component is underscored by spoken and sung text that directly addresses the question of community. To understand the role of the collective tableaux as communal scenes in the visual albums, I draw on Vernallis's analysis that "[p]op songs often relay utopian hopes, but only one singer articulates them, except perhaps for some confirmation by the backing vocalists. To depict these communal desires, the video needs to be populated by figures." Thus, collective tableaux representing Black women engaging in spiritual rituals, dancing, or synchronized swim-

[1] AAWL is recognizable especially in the forms of code switching and nonverbal sonic rhetoric in *Lemonade* (see McGee). For further reading on the specificities and importance of women's speech style within the African American speech community, see Morgan.

ming ("Mood," *BIK*) as well as tableaux in which Beyoncé is surrounded by still figures such as in *Lemonade*'s "Formation" populate the album's vision of the African diaspora and imply vastness. They also propose a "figural index of blackness" (Beverly 171): in *Lemonade*, the abundance of collective scenes make for a large panel of African American Blackness, from famous Black actresses to Black mothers who have lost sons to police brutality and social injustice. *BIK* looks at a broader spectrum of diaspora and at other *routes* (albeit not different roots) with the sampling, for instance, of Nigerian American spoken word poet Joshua Abah. Multiplicity thus becomes an inherent quality of community in both visual albums, a thought that the lyrics "kings don't die, we multiply" (spoken by Jay Z on "Mood 4 Eva") prolongate by intertwining multiplicity with the idea of regal, genealogical continuity.

Accordingly, throughout *BIK*, Beyoncé attempts to craft a new, communal understanding of kingship, which she claims is rooted in ancestral African practices. "It would be a much better world for all of us if kings and queens realized that being equal, sharing spaces, sharing ideas, sharing values, sharing strength, sharing weaknesses, balancing each other out, that is the way in which our ancestors did things, and that is an African way," a voice says. In *BIK*, kingship is immediately tied to community. This idea exists within a wider context that equates *The Lion King*'s Uncle Scar to Uncle Sam, and Mufasa to the wise, genuine, and compassionate African leader. In the tension between these two opposing worldviews, the young Black man who, as established by the title and unfolded throughout the album, is a king already, must choose which version of kingship—and of masculinity—he follows: "*Black Is King* further solidifies how the world could thrive when Black men step into kingship—one that's divorced from white supremacist ideas of hierarchy, dominance, and oppression and rooted in stewardship to community" (Obie).

The recurring motif of reflections and refractions offers another representation of this communal idea ("To live without reflection for so long might make you wonder if you even truly exist"; "Our ancestors hold us from within our own bodies, guiding us through our reflections. Light refracted"). In *The Lion King*, as well as in *BIK*, the reflection is both how we remember ourselves, or find our way back to ourselves, and where we can see our ancestors in us. As such, it can be read as a kind of portal between past and present as well as a space for projection. At the same time, this is not an individual experience: the coupled notion of "refraction" implies a division of light, a collective endeavor, a system in which people of African descent operate as one another's mirrors and spaces of projection: "I see us reflected in the world's most heavenly things. Black is king." This idea is furthered in the paratext to the visual album. Beyoncé's goal, stated on Instagram with the release of *BIK*, is to encourage African Americans, or the Black diaspora at large, to reproduce her journey toward knowing and embracing their African and Afrodiasporic heritage.

Drawing on the possibilities offered by the music video, Beyoncé and her team connote different temporalities by using Super 8, black and white, digital, as well as home video, alternately conveying private, self-archiving in footage form and grand collective visions for past, future, and present. In parallel, the sped up, slowed down, and cut-up imagery indicates a non-linear treatment of time: *BIK*'s "Find Your Way Back" begins with a large drone shot, then moves to a square video with grain which evokes the home video, then to solo and collective dance scenes sped up and cut so as to make movements appear robotic, to imagery that draws on the more typical pop video aesthetics of Beyoncé's solo beginning in which she dances illuminated in the middle of darkness, reminiscent of her video "1 + 1" (2011). This preoccupation with time and its shaping is reflected in lyrical text. In *Lemonade*'s "Intuition," Beyoncé speaks: "The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse." In *BIK*, she claims: "History is your future." In both cases, time is non-linear and past and present are mutually influenced in a way that draws on Afrofuturism (Edwards, Esposito, and Evans-Winters 93), and *BIK* does so even more explicitly and visually. Fittingly, time is also expressed in relation to personal pronouns ("we," "you"), indicating that the relationality between individuals and the imagining of the African diaspora relies on this transtemporal representation of communal, intertwined Blackness(es). Faced with established archives often steeped in the histories of slavery and colonialism, self-archiving can oftentimes mean writing *against* violence and erasure. Both albums are blueprints of spatial, sonic, and symbolic creation of new historical archives and new present and future representations.

In this communal space-time continuum, difference can be accommodated and incorporated. Syncretism, the hybridization of spiritual and cultural forms that are inherent to the African diaspora (and arguably, diasporic cultures at large), is at the heart of this incorporation. On the religious plane, syncretism became a motif of Beyoncé's work when referencing Santeria, Vaudou, Ifa, and Black Evangelical tradition in *Lemonade* (Brooks and Martin 207), and continued in *BIK* with the additional references to Hathor (an ancient Egyptian deity associated with the sky, womanhood, fertility, and love). The album became hailed as "an undeniable African diasporic poetic treatise and visual text that brings life and meaning to a broader Yoruba diaspora located within the Americas" (Jones 89), and as "Beyoncé's gospel of Black femme liberation via Pan African syncretism" (Highsmith 133). In *BIK*'s final track, "Black Parade," references from across the continent and the diaspora are joyfully and proudly claimed jointly: the Egyptian hieroglyph ankh, the West African dashiki popular in the African American Black Power movements, "Waist beads from Yoruba," the wealth of fourteenth-century Mali emperor Mansa Musa, and even Indian nag champa incense—all prompting Beyoncé to sing "Ooh, motherland, motherland, motherland, motherland drip on me." The cultural syncretism is addi-

tionally rendered by visuals such as the light blue color in *BIK*. Associated with African American Gullah, this color is usually painted on houses and applied to body art reminiscent of that of Nigerian artist Laolu Senbanjo in *Lemonade*. In doing so, Beyoncé and her team appear to offer an Afrodiasporic aesthetics that not only juxtaposes but imbricates multiplicity and fluid, hybrid identities. In *Lemonade* and *Black Is King*, the collagist aesthetics serve to craft a representation of the Black diaspora that can span across—and bring together—religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity to create a meaning of community as conversation—as an unidentified voice in *BIK* puts it: "It's not always a battle. It's a conversation."

In what Vernallis calls the post-post-classical moment, "dense, fast-changing audiovisual surface can coexist with more traditional storytelling. As in a music video, multiple, even contradictory subjectivities can be presented relatively seamlessly. Individual moments can come forward and recede, counterbalancing larger sections, without any gaining primacy" (Vernallis). This makes for extraordinary possibilities in the depiction of postmodern, transtemporal, and transcultural communities. But the weaving of a complex community narrative is not made solely through the formal, collaging possibilities. As I will show in the following, the two albums do not offer space for an associative thinking that could accommodate complexity, tension, and negotiation in the conception of the African diaspora (and the African continent in *BIK*) as a community. Instead, Beyoncé relies on the listener-viewer's ability to draw connections based on an underlying "right" reading, a decoding and initiation imperative in which the author wants to engage the listener-viewer, which suggests a unified myth and thus a grander, coherent narrative.

Re-Presenting the Dominant Narrative

Part of the value of *Lemonade* and *Black Is King* has been found, in popular reception, in their ability to create powerful, mythical counter-narratives of Black empowerment. While *Lemonade* was described as a "counter-historical text" (Brooks 164) that, beyond interrogating the archive, offers its own rewriting, *BIK* has been associated with myth-making: "a living myth roving terrain where myths were made," as Wesley Morris et al. wrote in the *New York Times*. The lyrics of *BIK*'s first track, "Bigger," make the endeavor of reframing the worth of Black people explicit: "If you feel insignificant / You better think again / Better wake up because / You're part of something way bigger." From there, referencing the Bible and the legal contract—two of the texts that best symbolize Western power—Beyoncé injuncts her addressee to "rewrite" and reframe the narrative. Refusing the misinterpretation of "just some words in a Bible verse" and the oppression hidden "in the fine print," Beyoncé portrays Black people as "the living word," flipping the oppres-

sive instrumentalization of the Bible, and she encourages them to "take the pen and rewrite" the dominant narrative. The address is multiple: Beyoncé's character sings about legacy and heritage to her fictional child only to open a few frames later to Beyoncé's own child, Blue Ivy, and soon through the previously evoked use of collective scenes to a broader Afrodiasporic interpretation.

This metonymic pattern is found throughout both albums. In *Lemonade*, the pain, anger, and joy of a wealthy, Southern, African American, mother, daughter, and wife can hold and be held by a broader narrative on heritage, slavery, patriarchy. As Omise'eke Tinsley points out, this technique can be traced back to classic blues where "trifling men have long been metonyms for a patriarchy that never affords black women the love and life they deserve" (24). In *BIK*, the coming-of-age journey of a young royal boy in rural Africa, based on an anthropomorphic Disney lion cub becomes "a blueprint for decolonizing Black masculinity" (Obie) as well as a multilayered representation of an African diaspora connected to and reconnecting with the continent. As both visual albums work toward making a singular Black community out of an acknowledged multitude, they also rely on making a multitude out of a singular narrative—specifically, on making Beyoncé's persona(l) a metonym for the collective.

There are, on the internet and in publications like *The Lemonade Reader* (2019), a plethora of articles unpacking the symbolics of Beyoncé's visual albums.[2] While I draw on them with gratitude, my interest here is not in a close interpretation of signs. Rather, I am interested in describing the most prominent *rewriting* and *re-presenting* processes from the perspective of Afrodiasporic community-making, with a focus on the more recent *Black Is King*.

Revisiting sites of oppression is a motif throughout the two visual albums, from the Afro-Creole plantation, the stone-walled tunnels reminiscent of slave forts on the Gulf Coast (Roberts and Downs), the party bus and its Jim Crow connotations in *Lemonade*, to the apartheid-times Ponte Tower in Johannesburg and the reference to Western courts and law in *BIK*. By making White people absent from all these sites, the visual albums appear to open the room for another representation. Similarly, Beyoncé re-enacts portraits of the Madonna and Child, inscribing herself and her family into the Western artistic canon and into a European modernity otherwise historically denied to Black people. Here, re-presentation takes place in the most classical way possible, in contrast to the occasion for the visual album: the display of Beyoncé's takes on the popular *Lion King* movie. Beyond the attempt at showcasing the continent's *human* beauty—rather than simply landscapes and animals—the visual album can be seen as moving beyond the archetypes of good and bad upon which the Disney movie is constructed. Most striking is the reframing of the motorcycle-driving Black men, who play the role of the original movie's antagonistic hyenas, into kings ("Already"). Ele-

2 A special mini-series of the podcast *Dis/sect* (2020), presented by Cole Cuchna and Dr. Titi Shodiya, provides a detailed interpretation of the references in *Black Is King* in seven parts.

ments such as the golden durag (a headpiece associated with African American urban culture), the car skidding, and the naked torso of these "kings" seem to imply a revalorization of men who have been framed in the United States as dangerous, gang-affiliated, and violent. *BIK* also infuses the original *Lion King*'s symbolics of star skies with Afrofuturist aesthetics: the young prince is a meteor who descends from outer space, where his ancestors are; the moon connotes African and feminine symbolisms; and in lyrics, the union between "dark matter" and "the color of my true love's skin" seals the cosmic bond between people of African descent and the universe.

Before *BIK*, *Lemonade* already deconstructed some biblical motives by reclaiming menstruation, female sexuality, and divine femininity (Tuialii) as well as by offering its hybridization with other belief systems as mentioned above. The motif of baptism, which was an important element of the personal and collective healing narrative in *Lemonade,* returns in *BIK* with a similar signification of re-birth, intertwined with the "other side" in the eponymous song. In the scenes that accompany "Otherside," Beyoncé's character puts her child into a basket which had been seen floating on the Nile River at the very beginning of the movie, reminiscent of the biblical story of Moses. The baptism that follows is illustrated by the basket's dive down a monumental waterfall that cuts to the emergence of the now adult character. Soon after, Beyoncé, in a different outfit and in a lush green setting, reunites with the baby—thus embodying "the other side." In an Afrodiasporic interpretative framework, the crossing of the River Nile can be read as a metaphor for the crossing of the Atlantic by enslaved Africans. This reference to the Middle Passage draws on the biblical story—and on the motif of the river to affirm continuity despite adversity and the promise that the separation will eventually come to an end ("best believe me / you will see me / on the other side"). To continue this metaphor, the shore and the coast are central in the visuals and the lyrics: Beyoncé is seen on a beach at the beginning of *BIK* and ritually wading in the water in *Lemonade.* Throughout *BIK,* we also find biblical formulations such as "keys to the kingdom" and "child of dust" ("son of dust" in *The Living Bible*, Ezekiel 36:1).

Crafting such a strong (counter-)narrative requires strong authorship—which, in the case of the visual albums, can appear to produce its own hegemonic discourse on the continent and in the diaspora. This strong authorship is not antithetical to the collaborative mode of the visual album. The emphasis is, in *Lemonade* and *BIK*, on how Beyoncé's authorship is scenarized and shown. She is the spiritual guide and the mother, the wife, and the daughter; she embodies herself and speaks in her own name (regardless of the original authorship of the text) and ties her personal story to that of the entire diaspora. Visually, Beyoncé's authorship is rendered as a specific counter-look (Jones), a reversal of "control of the panoptic gaze" (Duan 66), or simply a gaze in its own right. This empowered gaze, rendered possible by Beyoncé, is extended

to others, such as Serena Williams or the mothers of victims of police brutality. It can be directed defiantly at the camera, as in *Lemonade*'s "Hold Up" where the mechanical eye of the objective, as a stand-in for a patriarchal or dominant gaze, is destroyed by Beyoncé's baseball bat; it can also be Beyoncé's friendly, loving gaze towards fellow Black women, heavily scenarized in both visual albums, for instance in the visuals that accompany *BIK*'s "Brown Skin Girl."

Beyond the representation of authorship through this counter-gaze, however, lies the reality of the authority of the artist (and her team) over a narrative of transtemporal and transcultural Blackness. Both of the visual albums build on the characters' initiation, and the listener-viewers are similarly expected to let themselves be initiated, rather than actively converse with the work. Thus, the collaged plural aesthetics that could represent juxtapositions of Blackness and display an Afro-diasporic conversation and negotiation of community and identity, are contracted into a unified narrative that erases tension. An eloquent example is the question of colorism and beauty standards, which have been a marker of differentiation in Beyoncé's work throughout her career. At earlier points in her career, the singer frequently appeared surrounded by darker-skinned dancers and co-singers whose presence underscored the status conferred by her light skin tone and Afro-Creole heritage. Beyoncé has often been portrayed in distance to Blackness, as "an exoticness that was palatable to a predominantly white consumer base" (Crumpton). Despite the celebration in lyrics and in her casting choices of darker-skinned Black women, the emphasis put on her wealth and success by lyrics such as the chorus of "Formation" (*Lemonade*), juxtaposed with her "yellow-bone" or light-skinned Black carnation have raised criticism. As Erica B. Edwards et al. point out: "Despite claiming a preference for an African phenotype, she does not seem to challenge the colorist notions that have persisted throughout history" (91). In this tension resides the thin line between narrative and counter-narrative. As Sarah Olutola writes, "[w]hile Beyoncé surrounds herself with dancing dark-skinned African women, we see amidst the celebration of Africanness a retold Western fantasy of the dark African female body" (101). This reproduction of a Western fantasy can arguably be expanded to many more aspects of Beyoncé's representation of the African continent.

American Blackness(es) and "Africa": Representation, Projection, Appropriation

Lemonade and *Black Is King* weave a geography that spans from "Texas Bama" and the Louisiana swamps across the Atlantic Ocean into the Gulf of Guinea, and crosses the African continent towards South Africa and all the way to the Nile. It offers an Afrodiasporic "geography of liberation" (Lubin) that visually opens sites for Black healing and resilience. In it, the African continent is a central reference point, influence,

and backdrop. Its cultures and symbols are sampled and mixed throughout the albums and within singular shots, displaying clothing and neck jewelry from Nigeria and Masai (Roberts and Downs) and Ankara print jumpsuits (Tinsley 100) in *Lemonade*; Dogon-inspired masks and Congolese Mangbetu hairstyles (Omovbude), Ndebele paintings, and the red paste of Himba women of North Namibia in *BIK*, to cite a few. The result, in its accumulation, retains the composite nature evoked at the beginning of this article and offers a representation of the variety of the continent's culture and landscapes, thanks in part to the large number and diversity of African and Afrodiasporic creatives involved in the works (Almeida). Nonetheless, it also appears as an attempt to melt difference and tension not only into unity, but into a more familiar motif: an abstract "African" country. As I will go on to show, this tension can be replaced into wider interrogations on the relationship between continental and diasporic representations (and realities).

Abstractionism is a central topic of contention in the study of the African diaspora (Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora"), as more abstractionist perspectives insist on the role of Africa as a concept with no territorial reality for the African diaspora (Amselle qtd. in Thomas 156), while others affirm the importance of diasporic engagement with this reality beyond the concept. In *BIK*, "Africa" primarily serves as a source of cultural pride and as a metaphorical home. From finding one's "way back" to statements such as "you are welcome to come home to yourself" and "this is how we journey, far, and can still always find something like home," we encounter the idea of home as a shifting construct which can be found anywhere if only the diaspora knows its original home, the "motherland." A scene in *BIK* shows Black men waving the tri-colored Pan-African flag associated with African American liberation movements, and the black and green striped bodysuit that Beyoncé wears in some shots of "Find Your Way Back" underscores the Pan-African referential framework which the narratives of homeland and return recall. The complex genealogy of Pan-African thought offers a striking example of the centrality of diasporic and specifically of African American discourse in shaping the idea of global imaginings of Black solidarity and struggle for emancipation (see Adi).[3] But many of its most prominent diasporic examples also highlight the essentialist and abstractionist representation of the African homeland necessarily mobilized for its crafting, in movements as diverse as Négritude, Garveyism, or the Pan-Africanism of W. E. B. Du Bois.[4] Indeed, when Beyoncé states that "the coast belongs to our ancestors," only a high level of geographical and historical abstraction can produce a credible "us" and "our ancestors"; only the shore *and* the ancestors as metaphors can turn this sentence into a unifying cry rather than outright appropriation. The relationship between Africa and its diaspora, as represented by Beyoncé, demands this abstractionism to accommodate the idea of a community which will recognize itself as the legitimate audience, identify with *us*

[3] For an account of the evolution of Pan-African thought and discourse in the diaspora, and the relation to "continental" Pan-Africanism, see Edwards.

[4] On this matter, see especially Diagne. For more on W. E. B. Du Bois, see Irele; and Singh.

and with ancestral figures, and will recognize the use of what Gayatri Spivak has called "a *strategic* use of […] essentialism" (13; emphasis in original). In the case of *BIK*, cosmic metaphors and abstract formulations appear necessary to craft the high level of abstraction required to make this narrative work. "This is not Africa," Lauren Michel Jackson writes of *BIK:* "whatever is called 'African' functions as shorthand, connoting, in a single English word, a literally unimaginable plenitude of lives and livelihoods." Jackson refutes the idea that this use of "Africa" as a connotation raises problems, presenting it as a codification directed to Beyoncé's Western audience.

This prompts an examination of *BIK*'s addressee. Running through the narrative, *they* seems to describe the White supremacist power that negates beauty in Blackness ("We were beauty before they knew what beauty was"), attempts to take Black people's power ("They'll never take my power"), and is "always mad" at Blackness ("Black Parade"). Facing it is *we*, introduced in the chorus of *BIK*'s first track "Bigger": "Bigger than you, bigger than we. Bigger than the picture they framed us to see. But now we see it." Here, *we* refers rather generally to Black people, who are encouraged to oppose this structure and see to their own empowerment. Messages to the young prince in *BIK* seem to be intended to also function as messages to the diaspora at large. The beginning of the credits reads, under a video of Beyoncé's son: "Dedicated to my son, Sir Carter. And to all our sons and daughters, the sun and the moon bow for you. You are the keys to the kingdom." In this example, as throughout both of the visual albums, the personal is an iteration of the collective and the political, as is made clear in the credits' "Special Thanks" "To the Black diaspora across every continent." It seems evident that *we*, the community that *BIK* imagines, are Black people of the diaspora. But looking closely can appear to blur the self-evidence with which one slides from personal narratives to expanding understandings of community. By addressing "the Black diaspora across every continent," the credits leave open whether the diaspora is understood here as inclusive of the African continent, which is a recurrent and contentious question in Afrodiasporic studies. While *BIK* was framed by Beyoncé as a "love letter to Africa," this "Africa" remains a constructed entity that is only a fictitious addressee: the *only* distribution channel for *BIK* is an American streaming platform unavailable in African countries. Thus, "Africa" is primarily an object, rather than a subject, of the community conversation. The visual albums predominantly function as cultural artifacts embedded in a discourse of the African American community.

But in the world of globalized information and social media, the metaphor writes back. Pushing back on this (un)strategically essentialized object position, terms such as "Wakandification" (Bentil qtd. in Fatoba) and "motherlandization" of Africa (Chauke) have emerged to describe the essentialized cultural representation of the continent by African American creatives. Indeed, the scenes displaying contempo-

rary and urban African settings do not offset *BIK*'s overall closeness to the exoticizing imagery of the original *Lion King*. The urban African settings are negatively connoted in the narrative plot: they are the antagonist, the territory of the illegitimate king Scar. The same holds true for the previously mentioned red motorcycles that replace the original movie's hyenas, and the warehouse that represents the elephant graveyard. Like the reference to the never colonized Suri people of Omo Valley in Ethiopia before the song "Otherside," much of the celebrated cultural influences navigate a tenuous line between the important representation of Blackness outside of White colonialism and oppression, but they also reveal an underlying notion of authenticity and preservation of pre-colonial imagery which de facto excludes the continent from time and modernity.

"Africa" and "ancestors" are primarily tasked with embodying what is thought to be an African ancestral worldview and wisdom of the Ubuntu notion that "I am because we are," reminiscent in lyrics such as "I pour into you and you pour into me." In *Lemonade*, this idea is presented from a Black feminist perspective ("When you hurt me, you hurt yourself," Beyoncé sings to the man who betrays her), displaying an interdependency between Black men and women (Tinsley). But in *BIK*, feminism on the continent is considered relevant only in its ancestral, (a)historical forms, as in the references to the ancient Egyptian queen Nefertiti, and in symbols such as water and seeds which further the idea of reproductive complementarity. While being revered, women are put into the roles of caretakers, "reassembl[ing] men" and accompanying them on the path to kingship, more broadly crafting a traditional representation of womanhood as it is associated with the African continent. Borrowing Kaplan's term "melancholic diaspora," Erica B. Edwards, Jennifer Esposito, and Venus Evans-Winters call *Lemonade* a problematic and "beautiful, resonating interpretation of diasporic melancholia" (87)—a description which takes on an even stronger meaning in the context of *BIK*. Rather than a conversation between people of African descent on the continent and in its diaspora, *Black Is King* and *Lemonade* thus appear like melancholic diasporic monologues. The representation they offer of Africa and its diaspora is counter-hegemonic while simultaneously regurgitating elements of the ahistorical, exoticized, and primitivist picture it sets out to challenge.

Myth- and Money-Making

It might seem puzzling that these visual albums, whose format and conception accommodate multitude and diversity, which re-frame depictions of community and heritage in the African diaspora, and which *see* and *represent* people of African descent, can also be read as reproducing hegemony and enacting their own. It should not be surprising that one explanation to this phenomenon is profitability. As Olutola writes,

Beyoncé "cannot be extricated from—and should not be decontextualized from—the larger white patriarchal heteronormative capitalist context within which she, her work, and her success exist" (100). While Beyoncé sings she is "too smart to crave material things" in *Lemonade* ("Six Inch"), both albums' narratives of emancipation rely not only on spiritual healing, but also on being a "Mansa Musa" ("Black Parade") or "a Black Bill Gates in the making" ("Formation"). In *BIK*, one scene in particular provides an ambiguous commentary on capitalism and wealth: as the young prince is seen rolling by in a leopard print Rolls Royce, dreaming of the Carter lifestyle in a Beverly Hills mansion, he drives past Beyoncé and the Blue Man, respectively symbolizing his ancestral guide and subconscious guide in the physical life (Stephen Ojo qtd. in Carter). As a metaphor, this scene indicates how the young man's consumerism and capitalism—and by extension, that of the whole diaspora—might be misled, and misleading. This can be read as a reflection on the display of cultural and economic capital that is an essential part of the brand cultivated by Beyoncé and her husband, the rapper Jay Z. The semantics on regality and use of superlatives pursues the connotations of wealth in *BIK*, albeit in ambiguous ways. The kingship narrative is abstracted and opened supposedly beyond hierarchy: the message "be your own king" and the idea that all Black people are "kings already" emphasize this communal conception of kingship, but do not fully emancipate it from the competitive, individualist, and anti-democratic connotations of the royal imagery. Beyoncé's artistic narrative and self-presentation is imbued with hierarchization—including among Black people—that constructs the neo-liberal, capitalist, and extremely hierarchical entertainment industry of which Beyoncé is a powerhouse (Olutola 104). Beyond the symbolic plane, the structural imbalances between North and South, between pop giant and smaller creators find echo in the claims that have arisen regarding improper pay of African artists and outright plagiarism. Notably, many visuals from "Spirit" and "Bigger" appear to have been copied from a Congolese-Angolan artist, Petite Noir, who was neither credited nor compensated.

Of *Lemonade*—and I believe the claim can be expanded to *BIK*—bell hooks writes:

> Viewers who like to suggest [it] was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé's audience is the world, and that world of business and money-making has no color.

I want to argue that there is another layer to this sharp invalidation of Beyoncé's specific address of "Black women," "the Black diaspora," and "Africa." Beyond the question of audience and profitability, I want to draw attention to the interrelation between mythmaking and profitability. As I have sought to show throughout this article, the albums'

rationale as counter-narratives and healing myths require unification through a strong authorship and the erasure of tension. While this is primarily an imperative of narrative, it is connected to the imperative of profitability that prompts Beyoncé's inscription in the entertainment industry. The framework of the albums' rewriting practice takes place within a framework which favors a strong plot, clear message, and identifiable codes and references. The movie upon which *BIK* is based—the original 1994 *Lion King* movie—is Disney's vision of a bestial, ahistorical Africa, inspired among other influences by the biblical stories of Joseph and Moses, and reinvested through "oppositional" referencing or signifyin(g) in the sense of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In their oppositional mythmaking, Beyoncé and her team may counter oppressive discourses and craft emancipatory narratives; but they do so in ways that must remain palatable to a wide audience not only in content, but also in form.

The representation of Black cultures is a central issue in both visual albums. "Representation" is here to be understood in both of its intertwined meanings—"to depict" *and* "to speak for." Perhaps the colloquial use of the term *representin(g)* (in the sense of representin' or repping, particularly in hip-hop music) best illustrates the correlation between the two facets of representing. In this use, the term "representing" adds a communal layer to the speaker position and provides a social or geographical context to individual expression, while oftentimes being devoted to the idea of describing, expounding, depicting. I want to argue that the collagist, kaleidoscopic representations that the visual albums offer of a diverse diaspora "in conversation" are offset by this very (double-)function of *representin(g)* as an intertwining of authorship over representation and of a communal endowment. The narrative imperative, here, is to counterbalance the nuanced and complex possibilities of the visual album by unifying it as a recognizable and marketable grand narrative. From there proceeds the necessity for archetypal thinking, abstraction, and Beyoncé's role as storyteller, mythmaker, and translator. But Blackness appears to be translated in one direction only—from the African continent to North America, towards its more profitable audience. If, as Adam Ewing formulates it, diaspora "calls attention not to the past, but to the politics" (132), it entails an important element of negotiation and conversation. By opposition, the mythmaking that appears as the central endeavor to *BIK* requires a level of abstractionism and essentialism which renders tension invisible or preemptively solved. It thus shuts down the communal conversations that make the Black diaspora "a site for the construction of black identity" (Ewing 132), appearing, if anything, more like a battle than a conversation.

Conclusion

In *Black Is King*'s track "Mood 4 Eva," Jay-Z subverts Gil Scott Heron's "The revolution will not be televised," stating that "the marathon

will be televised." This statement not only carries the legacy of deceased rapper Nipsey Hussle and his album *The Marathon*, but also makes the political affirmation that when (a few) Black creators own the means of production (and therefore of representation), the revolution might precisely be audiovisual. But *Lemonade* and *Black Is King* show that *representin(g)* across a vast panel of Afrodiasporic and African realities is a complex endeavor in which the line between counter-narratives and reproduction of hegemonic discourses are rarely clearly drawn. In the video to "Power" (*BIK*), five female artists from diverse origins in Africa and its diaspora come together to shape a Ghanaian adinkra called "bese saka," which simultaneously connotes affluence, power, wealth, and unity or togetherness. The symbolic richness that can come from unity (or solidarity) will surely resonate across the African diaspora—but so will the depth of the interplays between wealth, power, and the unification of Blackness into a marketable narrative.

Narration and mythmaking play a central role in building a collective identity that can unfold politically; at the same time, the very act of representing the African diaspora within the narrative constraints of the entertainment industry means putting it into one story strand, or brand. Nonetheless, Beyoncé's visual albums open formal possibilities for breaking with the monolithic representation of Blackness in audiovisual narratives. They offer glimpses of an Afrodiasporic visual language which embraces its kaleidoscopic and non-linear nature, prompting exciting perspectives for the future of audiovisual experiments and their analysis.

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"I Do It for the 'Gram and Do It for Myself": Bearing Witness, Self-Archiving, and Avoiding Capture under Racial Capitalism

Michael L. Thomas

Abstract

This article explores the work of Fabrice Lubin, a psychotherapist in Chicago, and Marquise Richards, an educator in Reading, Pennsylvania, who organize online events and promote media that engage with the impact of racism on professional, political, and community life. Their work shows how the practice of self-archiving brings individuals together into communities that, when well organized, can serve as political counterpublics. Through the aesthetics of bearing witness, these communities can connect individual experiences to community issues as a platform for collective action. I argue that successful action requires that the individuals who facilitate the construction of archives ground their work in the concerns and material interests of the community to avoid replicating the exploitative habits of racial capitalism that threaten social movements in the age of social media.

Key Words: black aesthetics; black existentialism; social media; identity capitalism; culture work

In "Constituting an Archive," Stuart Hall characterizes the archive as more than a collection. It is a process of "continuous production," he writes, which lives through the activities of culture workers gathering the material of artists into an assemblage (91).[1] This assemblage generates a tradition, an "embodied discourse," which weds the work of the archive with the representation, norms, and interests of the community it assembles (89). It remains in motion as new works are produced and added, producing new stories about the whole, given the changing configuration of the parts. What changes when the content of the archive

[1] I use the term "culture worker" as an alternative to terms like "influencer" or "creative" that specifies an obligation that artists, professionals, community workers, and others have towards working within and for the sake of their communities. This term is used by Cornell West to identify the insurgent role he believes that Black intellectuals should play as "critical organic catalyst[s]" in institutions (121). The term has also been taken up by contemporary culture workers to signify the political valence of their work in the socialist tradition (Sprenger).

is a human life, transformed in a moment of strife and upheaval? What happens when the stakes of the archive are tied intimately to the selfhood of the artist, along with the archivist and audience, in a moment where the fate of the community is at risk? For members of the African diaspora, the need to archive the work of our community frequently occurs in contexts where the value of the artists and art works is at stake. With the rise of social media technology, the self-archiving practices of members of the diaspora have brought these communal concerns to the construction of the self as individuals and organizations carve out spaces for witnessing, gathering, and living in digital spaces that replicate the racist, oppressive, and exploitative practices that structure the world outside of the screens. Self-archiving makes Blackness visible from the perspective of the user as artist.[2] It gives meaning to Blackness by demonstrating the relationship between race and the self that ties personal history to broader racial history.

In this article, I examine the self-archiving practices of two culture workers, Fabrice Lubin, a psychotherapist in Chicago, and Marquise Richards, an educator in Reading, Pennsylvania, who actively organize online events and promote media that engage their professional and personal communities on issues of identity and racism. During the uprisings of 2020, both men's work accelerated with the aim of using their existing platforms to organize themselves with their communities to address the forms of racism these communities face. I argue that their works form a Black existential project, insofar as they are grounded in an articulation of Blackness through lived experience that theorizes their individual conditions in the context of their communities and offers an understanding of freedom through self-determination (Gordon ch. 2 and 3). They differentiate themselves from statements of corporate solidarity and political symbolism through their engagement with the embodied discourse of Black witnessing, which exposes the racist structures that generate their projects and grounds them in affective relationships with members of their communities, transforming their theorizations of blackness into collective action. At the same time, they avoid the tendency of media towards identity capitalism and elite capture by emphasizing the self-definition of the community and its aims while self-consciously rejecting the forms of predatory inclusion found in digital marketing spaces. This analysis points to a set of norms and practices that link online culture work with concrete political projects in a model to guide future projects.

2 Throughout this essay, "black" and "white" are left in lowercase as adjectives when used to characterize persons or objects. I have capitalized "Black" and "White" in cases where Blackness or Whiteness is self-consciously ascribed to indicate a positive project of embodied racialization rather than designation by phenotype.

Identity Capitalism and the 2020 Uprisings

On May 25, 2020, Officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd as his fellow officers, and later the rest of the world, watched. In the days and months that followed, people took to the streets in one of the largest visible uprisings for racial justice in decades. Citizens marched together, masked and distanced due to pandemic regulations, in the face of rows

of police officers who would eventually rush and assault them. In Seattle, protesters forced police officers to abandon their precinct, establishing the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. In Minneapolis, a precinct was burned to the ground. On June 1, in Washington, D.C., President Donald Trump ordered state governors to clear the streets or, he threatened, he would do it for them. Shortly thereafter, a crowd in Lafayette Square was cleared with tear gas and riot batons, so that the president could take a photo holding a Bible (upside down) in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, providing an image of control in a situation where he had lost it.

The conventional wisdom of the moment was that the mass outrage contained in the protest was the result of the lockdown of restaurants and businesses to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Millions of people in the United States, stuck in their homes, were forced to reckon with the video of Floyd's murder, which was broadcast continuously across television, social media, and websites. This explanation characterizes the violence of that moment as a singular powder keg, which obscures the ongoing anti-black violence prior to the murder of Mr. Floyd. On March 13, two months prior, Breonna Taylor was murdered by Louisville police officers serving a no-knock warrant. On February 23, two white men shot Ahmaud Arbery while he was jogging in his neighborhood. Neither man was arrested until two months later, after the case received wider media attention. These deaths punctuated the disproportionate fatality rate of black people in the United States due to COVID-19, a trend that was racialized as a failure of the "black community" rather than as the result of socio-economic precarity and the fact that many black people, now labeled "essential workers," were placed at continued risk as others in the United States were ordered to "stay at home." Despite the impact on black people, President Trump announced that he would seek to "reopen" the country by Easter (April 12, 2020).

I was in Paris when the police killed George Floyd. Feeling dislocated from my country and community, I took to social media. I was not alone. Individuals met on social media platforms to exchange opinions about the condition of the country. Activists shared information about ongoing protests to counter the media narratives of what was happening in the streets. These initial actions generated larger institutionalized responses. Corporations posted solidarity statements with #BlackLivesMatter. There was a day of users posting black squares in support of protesters in the streets which, allegedly, threatened communication on the ground. The Congressional Democrats kneeled in Kente cloth (Figure 1).

As these images flooded in, users debated whether their own online activity was helpful or contributing to a noisy politics of representation that promised recognition without producing any of its benefits. This tension in internet use, along with the embrace of "anti-racism" as a watchword for social institutions and enterprises, has led to the development of an aesthetic of "woke capitalism," which focuses on visible diversity as a sign of racial progress (Rossi and Táíwò). In the face of

Figure 1. Thomas, Michael. "Congressmen Kneeling."
@epimetheus81. Instagram. 9 June 2020.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CBMxo-kjYhI/.

visible signs of racial oppression and exploitation encountered in media, organizations have responded by producing greater representation of racialized peoples as a sign of social change. This change is real insofar as there is an increased permeability of the elite class by members of oppressed and exploited groups. However, this increased number of non-white and non-rich people in the elite class does not translate to an experience of material and social justice for other members of those groups (Rossi and Táiwò).

In digital media, this phenomenon expresses itself in what Tressie McMillan Cottom labels "predatory inclusion," "the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms" (443). A prime example of this process was a campaign of advertisements in favor of California Prop. 22, which maintained the status of gig economy workers as independent contractors, denying them the benefits of full employment. A 2020 pre-election ad by the ridesharing company Lyft presents images of a multi-racial, predominantly black set of drivers who were hired because the service provided a way to "earn a little extra" for "people from all walks of life." It provided them with the "independence" and "flexibility" needed to take care of their families. Without the proposition, 90 % of the jobs would simply disappear (Figure 2).

Figure 2. "What Is Prop 22 | California Drivers |
Vote YES on Prop 22 | Rideshare | Benefits | Lyft."
YouTube, uploaded by Lyft. 8 Oct. 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7QJLgdQaf4.

These advertisements, promising secure employment, propagandistically obscure that their jobs provide a mere wage and perpetuate the insecurity faced by their employees. This situation demonstrates how predatory inclusion, which Nancy Leong terms "identity capitalism," presents harmful effects on the individual and societal level. For the individual, identity capitalism forces marginalized people to participate in their exploitation or face negative consequences. In this case, employees are included insofar as they provide a veneer of aid to precarious workers (63). On a societal level, "identity capitalism encourages ingroup members to think of outgroup members in terms of their instrumental value," as the above case shows, while fostering distrust against ingroup members (66). The discourse surrounding these ads and the endorsement of #BlackLivesMatter by corporations and politicians raised these concerns, particularly as the majority of the responses remained symbolic.[3] This form of identity capitalism is not unique to large corporations and government elites. Nancy Leong has identified identity entrepreneurs as willing participants in identity capitalism, who leverage their identity in accord with outgroup expectations for profit (19). Identity entrepreneurs often profit from their capitalism without benefit to their community, which generates charges of "selling out" often aimed at online activists (140). The tension between identity capitalism and identity entrepreneurism shaped debates over online activism insofar as identity capitalism's focus on aesthetic or numerical diversity "diverts attention and resources away from tangible substantive improvements to race relations" (67).

Social media platforms, though presented as communication tools, are marketplaces. They profit from the data we produce through likes, shares, and tracks we leave online. At the same time, many black users rely on the internet as a source of information outside of the views of the mainstream media. In the following, I examine how Fabrice Lubin and Marquise Richards approach their work knowing that social media platforms promote corporations and influencers over activists. Both approach self-representation and community engagement with a view towards the needs of their communities rather than appeals to white audiences for action. They engage in forms of witnessing that simultaneously appeal for action and allow the community to make their needs visible in ways that are short-circuited in appeals to the white gaze. Through this interaction, I want to place myself in community with their work, contributing to an academic archive that traces how we can approach the work of reflecting on Blackness, community organization, and the perils of racial capitalism through aesthetic engagement.

Self-Archiving as a Black Existential Project

Hall's conception of the archive as an embodied history with stakes and investments in the life of the community connects the cultural dimension of archiving with its philosophical significance. The archive, as

3 Erin Logan argues that increased white solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter "gentrifies" the movement due to white people participating in the movement for political gain. In a popular response, Adolf Reed, Jr., has argued against El Jones that the movement cannot be coopted because it lacks a coherent politics. For Reed, the movement itself is a branding exercise that, while it brings attention to anti-black violence, merely stands as an empty tagline that can be deployed without political engagement.

an embodied discourse, takes place in a lived history. When the subject of the archive is the self, it participates in a tradition of philosophical explorations of the lived experience of black people. As George Yancy argues, black philosophy takes place in the "crucible of lived history," which treats the concept of Blackness in terms of its historical articulations in the lives of black people (5-6). This historical articulation evades abstract conceptualizations of Blackness in order to face the existential stakes under which it is theorized. Yancy articulates these stakes by posing a question to theorists: "How does one philosophize in the abstract given the existential gravity and horror of thousands of black bodies lynched?" (8). At the conjuncture of the 2020 uprisings, Yancy's question indicates that an analysis of responses to these horrors and attempts to struggle for communities of black people ought to be grounded in how blackness is theorized from the perspective of people engaged with this struggle, an element found in Lubin's and Richards's projects.

Figure 3. Richards, Marquise. "Liberation. Part 1." @marquisedavon. Instagram. 10 Sept. 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CE9RYuLB2nK/.

This portrait of Richards (Figure 3) comes from the centerpiece of his documentary project *To the Mountain*, which he released in September 2020 along with a digital discussion in December. The watchwords "Create, Educate, Liberate" are three pillars he uses to conceptualize his work as an educator and creative interested in the liberation of black people (Figure 4). In the documentary, these words introduce phases of self-exploration, as Richards uses monologue and interviews set in his neighborhoods in Pennsylvania to present the history behind his projects. Rather than non-performative slogans, which promise a commitment without generating activity (Ahmed 105), these terms establish the dimensions of his existential project.

Creativity, which Richards uses to signal both action and expressions, is an ideal of transformation. It is existentially tied to his work in theater and media as spaces of self-development and confrontation with race and racism. In the opening of the documentary, Richards presents creativity as a necessity drawn out of lack. He was drawn to theater as a way of embodying something else to "get out of this shitty situation

[he] was in," meaning his family's position in a low socioeconomic area of Pennsylvania (Richards, *Mountain*).

Figure 4. Richards, Marquise. "Create. Educate. Liberate." @marquisedavon. Instagram. 2 Sept. 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CEnlJhqnhQq/.

Education emerges from a tension in Richards's project of liberation. On the one hand, Richards, the first of his family to attend college, experienced the university as "the ultimate escape," an intellectual and physical route out of his shitty situation. On the other hand, he also expresses that the space of higher education, "the ultimate escape," is also the space where he was first challenged to "reckon with [his] Blackness" (*Mountain*). Events on campus and during his study abroad trip in the Czech Republic motivated him to pursue his creative work in the interest of social justice: "The very thing that taught me to escape is the very thing that humbled me and brought me back to the reality of the space I grew up in" (*Mountain*), he says. Similar to W. E. B. Du Bois's narrative in "Of the Coming of John," education and awareness of the socio-political position of black people made him dissatisfied, driving a desire for education in the service of community. He contextualizes his current work in August Wilson's mission to show the humanity of black people with the acknowledgment that "all black art is inherently didactic to non-black audiences" due to a lack of cultural experience (*Mountain*). His work aims "to center Blackness from the bottom up" (*Mountain*), by acknowledging black people prior to any references to the white gaze. The goal of liberation is not having to put Blackness prior to personhood; it is to exist as a black person without having to carry the socio-political disadvantages of Blackness (*Mountain*).

For Fabrice Lubin, being Black is multifaceted (Personal Interview). It encompasses a wide range of languages, ethnicities, and experiences beyond the commonly witnessed experiences of ongoing racism in a nation that paints itself as peaceful. Lubin founded For Real Therapy as a bid for autonomy in professional psychology, where he finds that the racial and economic orientation of the practitioners creates alienated conditions in which black practitioners are expected to bracket their personhood from their therapeutic practice (Figure 5). When leaving his prior practice, Lubin was told that he could not take his clients with

him since "[y]ou can't work at the Apple Store and take their Phones" (Personal Interview). The relationship between client and clinician is described in terms of the trade of commodities; patients and clients are treated as fungible, and any one is as good as any other—a condition that Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman have connected to blackness as black people are treated as interchangeable bodies to be traded as will in forms of neoliberal racism (Winnubst 104-05, 110).
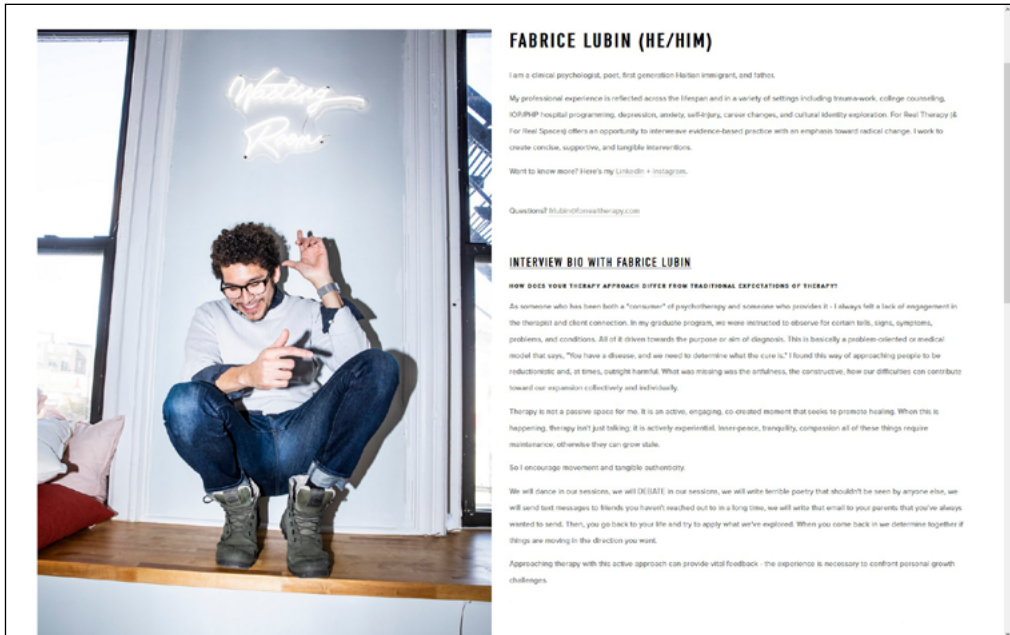

Figure 5. "Fabrice Lubin." For Real Therapy. https://www.forrealtherapy.com/fabricelubin.

Lubin's response is to treat his practice as a space in which to treat black bodies as Black people by attending to difference and the content of individual experiences. In his practice, Blackness functions as a value system. Lubin asserts that "[i]t's a way to say, 'Let's think more complexly and more deeply about how we are interrelated in this world […]. Let's meditate on what the consequences a majority group can have, and how that impacts the minority group'" (Personal Interview). Lubin practices this value by working with clients to find "shared language and support" to develop individualized resources that are inconceivable in frameworks that treat Blackness as fungible and black people as interchangeable commodities (Personal Interview).

For Lubin and Richards, Blackness is a creative concept that grows from the multifariousness of the experiences and strivings of black people. The historical fungibility of blackness as an abstraction opens a space to define blackness in ways that strive toward novel relationships in a world that restricts possibilities for black people. This process de-

mands the integration of art and life by wedding ideals and practices to produce ways of relating that avoid patterns of domination that govern our social systems. The Black existential projects of Lubin and Richards are simultaneously Black aesthetic projects, involved in "creating and maintaining black life-worlds" by finding "common cause in the essentially human act of aesthetic self-fashioning" (Taylor 2). The work of art, in this case, is the work of archiving experience, linking individual experience with the experiences of others to form a shared understanding that animates community institutions through shared strivings and collective action.

Black Witnessing as Counter Vision and Community Building

The aesthetic vehicle for Lubin's and Richards's projects is Black witnessing. Bearing witness is a form of prophetic speech that testifies to experiences that tie together individual life and the life of the community to make larger claims about political reality or spiritual life. It is fundamental to James Baldwin's aesthetics, which connect his biography, social contexts, and the social ills that still plague the country to call for black and white U.S. Americans to see the incoherent violence that characterizes life in the United States (Miller 335). Beyond being a call to see, Black witnessing demands that listeners affirm and propagate what is heard. In hip-hop music, for example, the refrain "Can I get a Witness?" is a form of call and response that asks listeners to affirm what they have heard by sharing the artists' testimony with people outside of the community of hip-hop listeners (Skitolsky ch. 1). It indicates that one takes part in a collective action of sharing the community's truths to build solidarity. Finally, Black witnessing is a call to move from hearing, seeing, and speaking to collective action. In her recent book, *Bearing Witness While Black*, Allissa Richardson demonstrates how witnessing in digital media mobilizes black people in the United States (5). She writes, "[w]hen most African Americans view fatal police shooting videos, something stirs at a cellular level. They want to *do* something about what they just saw. And they want to link it to similar narratives they may have seen before" (5; emphasis in original). The uprisings of 2020 show that this call to mobilization extends beyond communities of black people when conditions are right.

Black witnessing as a form has been developed in a long tradition of alternative media production that gives agency to black people by speaking from their perspectives and providing experiential analysis of the systems of domination that threaten their existence. According to Richardson, Black witnessing in digital media "(1) assumes an investigative editorial stance to advocate for African American civil rights; (2) co-opts racialized online spaces to serve as its ad-hoc news distribution service; and (3) relies on interlocking black public spheres, which are endowed

with varying levels of political agency, to engage diverse audiences" (7). In the context of the 2020 uprisings, Black witnessing resists the post-racial sensibility that generates an insensitivity to anti-black violence in the United States that treats the history of these events as discrete, tragic instances of excessive force by police officers (Frankowski). In addition, it opens a space for those who face violence to speak their truth and resist the narrative that anti-black violence is a tragically necessary part of life in the United States. Richards's and Lubin's projects model the practice of Black witnessing and demonstrate how it adapts in times of crisis to respond to their anxieties and the communities they serve.

Figure 6. Richards, Marquise. "City Hall." @marquisedavon. Instagram. 31 May 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CA3awgJHJoR/.

Black witnessing begins with a call to bear witness grounded in the witness's experience. For Richards's first project, the #DearRDG podcast, the impetus came from an experience of racist characterizations of his city by other students at his university. He recalls, "I kept getting comments about being from Reading, Pennsylvania, and they were just like, 'Oh, you survived? How'd you do that?' So, I realized, the greater context of Reading in Pennsylvania, at least, was very negative" (Personal Interview). In Du Boisian terms, Richards encountered perceptions of black people as a problem people rather than people with problems (Gordon 69). In response, Richards set out to create a platform that presented the conditions that affected his community in a narrative that showed them as a historical reality rather than an ontological feature of the lives of black people (Figure 6). "#DearRDG the podcast came out of us wanting to add perspective into a narrative that they weren't adding," he says. "They weren't talking about institutionalized racism, they weren't talking about redlining, they weren't talking about all of these things that would get to somebody acting like this, or community would form the way that it did" (Personal Interview). By engaging with the conditions of his community, Richards generated a space for community members to communicate with one another and develop a public voice. The podcast has served as a forum for conversations among community members to counteract negative stereotypes and narrate the community's issues and

its joys. The discussions range from pop culture events and controversies, to community care, and to national and social issues. In line with the principles of his project, Richards describes the mission of the podcast as "making a space for Blackness" by gathering members of the community to share experiences, issues, joys, and making these interactions visible to provide a platform for collective action (Personal Interview).

During the uprisings, the podcast served as a forum for the community to pressure politicians to act. "Last year when everything happened, specifically with Ahmaud Arbery," Richards recalls, "our mayor did not respond. He didn't say anything about it. So, our podcasts had to essentially make a statement and also call him out" (Personal Interview). This discourse evolved into a town hall meeting on "the state of Blackness in Reading, Pennsylvania," in which community members could speak directly to politicians (Personal Interview; Figure 7).

Figure 7. "DearRDG Town Hall." YouTube, uploaded by Marquise Davon Productions. 31 May 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKIGKGXeN4s.

Beyond airing grievances, these conversations aimed to hold politicians accountable to community members while decentering Richards as a leader or spokesperson:

> You need to listen to the people that you deem as invisible, to also inform how you're making these policies. If you're not talking to the men on the stoop, who deal with the kids in the neighborhood on a regular basis, the grandma who is watching over the neighborhood, then you're not doing your work that you need to because you're not in community with any of them. (Personal Interview)

These moves distance Richards's method from forms of identity entrepreneurship that profit from the community without benefiting them. While he highlights his own identity in projects like "To the Moun-

tain," the core of the platform is its role as a space for community mobilization and education.

Richards's emphasis on interacting directly with and in the community aligns with Lubin's mission of engaging with issues of black mental health practitioners and clients. During the uprisings of 2020, he recognized a shift in the discourse surrounding race and an openness to keeping it real about the varying experiences of oppression and exclusion affecting black people in the United States.[4] "When George Floyd was murdered," he states, "you had journalists, and professional people, feeling like, I'm gonna take off my mask for a moment. You know, you'd be watching someone in the middle of a newscast be like, '(sigh). Alright, I'm sorry, I gotta say this'" (Personal Interview). This opening of the gates brought many black professionals to relive traumas of our enculturation into predominantly white professions. Lubin read these moments as a real-time reckoning with professionalization as a process of "whitening," in which success requires black professionals to deny the reality of their experiences. In response, Lubin began to publish a set of "musings" under the title "The Psychology of Representation," drawing on his educational and clinical experiences to develop an alternative account of what representation means in these spaces. The musings provide a language for the problems facing the practice and people, which go ignored in professional discussions.

4 The use of "keeping it real," along with "speak their truth" previously, refers to the need to speak without masking intentions described by Lubin in the quotation that follows. The need to "take off [one's] mask," is generated by discursive conditions where direct invocations of experiences of racism risk delegitimizing the words of the speaker prior to any engagement with the content of their speech. In contrast with "code switching," which remixes speech for the purpose of intelligibility, "keeping it real," aims to directly challenge anti-black and post-racial sensibilities that demand that discussions of anti-black racism and violence situate themselves into an ideological framework that grants the progressiveness of societies and relieve listeners of any complicity in the anti-blackness that permeates the discursive context.

Figure 8. "For Real Therapy Musing #22." For Real Therapy. https://www.forrealtherapy.com/musings/2020/7/16/the-psychology-of-representation-part-1.

Lubin's first musing begins with the "mask off" moments to reflect on the experiences that professionalized black people are asked to leave behind before "arriving" in their roles. "Direct and authentic display of wounds, abuses, joy, resilience, and resistance matter to our human community," he writes. "It deepens our understanding of what BIPOC and other marginalized people endure before their 'arrival,' whether it is in the media, the classroom, boardroom, or our healing spaces" (Lubin, Part 1; Figure 8). Here, Lubin uses his own response to media

appearances by black professionals to highlight how the emotional experiences of black people and other people of color are abject in professional spaces, even as we are asked to draw on these experiences in our work. He concludes the piece with two questions, "*What exactly do we as BIPOC people do with our pain?*" and "for whose benefit does it serve?" (Lubin, Part 1; emphasis in original). These questions pose a challenge to an understanding of representation as presence in a space. For Lubin, representation is more than presence; it requires that the experience of the people represented can take up space in those places. This leads him to an examination of the dynamics of clinical spaces, particularly their whiteness.

Figure 9. "For Real Therapy Musing #33." For Real Therapy. https://www.forrealtherapy.com/musings/2020/7/30/the-psychology-of-representation-part-3.

In his second musing (Figure 9), Lubin examines the meaning of whiteness as a structural feature of clinical spaces. "Therapy offices, hospitals, and wellness places reflect the structures, values, and guidance invested within it," he writes. "Those [white] individuals who governed and led their organizations approached things with an aggressive homogeneity. It was comfortable to be neutral, to allow themselves to exist within an illusion of distance, and not reckon with systemic suffering and white supremacy" (Lubin, Part 2; see Figure 9). In this analysis, whiteness presents itself as a presumed position of neutrality and sterility, which valorizes itself over alternative forms of self-presentation and denigrates the experiences of clients. Lubin writes, "[t]hese sterile environments perpetuate the belief that individuals experiencing mental health-related issues are fragile and hopeless" (Lubin, Part 3).

The valorization of sterility and neutrality is not only aesthetically coded in the environments of clinical spaces; it also manifests in the dispositions of practitioners towards their clients. This aesthetic is tied to historical processes of racialized aestheticization, which offers the promise of whiteness as ordered universality against the threat of blackness as chaotic (Roelofs 30-31; lowercase in original). The use of this pro-

cess in clinical spaces generates an aestheticized racialization of clients and patients that betrays the neutrality of the clinical space by recasting the clinic as a prison. In his third musing, Lubin recalls:

> Working within a clinic[al] and hospital environment, I encountered adult mental health "advocates" and "professionals" speaking like embittered police officers. Their cynicism permeated the air with crude jokes about their patients, references to "repeat offenders who were beyond saving" and offers to trade clients that they found annoying or below their standards. (Lubin, Part 3)

This experience parallels Lubin's discussion with his previous supervisor, who referred to clients as interchangeable with consumers of therapy as product. In this case, the racial dimension of whiteness appears in the form of discourses of criminality associated with blackness and white poverty. It demonstrates the superficiality of representations in clinical spaces which reduce clients and professionals to two-dimensional roles governed by bare rules of engagement. In contrast, Lubin's "Psychology of Representation" argues for a practice that "seek(s) to create an environment where vulnerability is encouraged, culture is welcomed, and consent is paramount," which is in line with his understanding of Blackness as a value of collective engagement with the complexity of human experience (Lubin, Part 2). This process involves unlearning the habit of "unseeing" black people and perceiving them as threatening or abject bodies (Lubin, Part 2). As a result, Lubin claims, "my BIPOC clients relate to the pleasure and experience of finally being seen rather than perceived" (Lubin, Part 2). In 2020, these reflections on representation served as the starting point for a forum for black psychologists and other practitioners to share their professional experiences and the practices they developed to serve their communities. This conversation has led to collaborations among these practitioners including Lubin's work with "Coffee, Hip-Hop, and Mental Health," a center that provides service primarily to marginalized people utilizing a payment model that subsidizes care for clients who cannot afford it.

As acts of Black witnessing, Lubin and Richards draw from their own experience to make the strivings of their communities visible among one another and to the public. In this process, they draw the personal and political together by organizing the community and creating spaces for their voices to be transformed into action. As these projects unfold, there is the danger that they can fall into identity capitalism, as this paradigm structures the activities of politicians and sources of funding that they require.

Elite Capture or Democratic Leadership?

As #BlackLivesMatter was publicly embraced in summer 2020, critics were concerned that we were seeing the elite capture of identity politics to maintain the status quo (Táíwò). In contrast with the origi-

nal formulation of identity politics by the Combahee River Collective as "building a political viewpoint out of common experience to work toward 'common problems'" (Táíwò), this form of politics moralizes identity for personal gain, moral superiority, or narrow group interests. In my engagement with both Lubin's and Richards's projects, I carry the concern that our positionality may threaten our efforts to aid our communities. The history of politics among black people indicates that claims for a wide sense of Blackness often obscure the class-specific differences in experience and interests that exist between the black proletariat, black elites, and the black bourgeoisie (Frazier qtd. in Táíwò). Despite a shared vulnerability and precarity, class shapes our interests and habits such that we see many people working in service of self while understanding themselves to be working for the community. Within Richards's and Lubin's projects there is a critical tension between their desire to resist the draw of individual gain in line with their understandings of Blackness and the market-oriented vocabularies of social media platforms that threaten their ability to bear witness with the community rather than for themselves.

Richards is aware of the role that his education plays in his acceptability in political spaces. His framing of school as a "way out" in his discussion of education shows that education is associated with an elevated social and economic status, which gives him access to resources and elites that others may not have. Richards recognizes that the distinction between "the hood" and the academy is generated by racist aestheticizations of the two spaces and by material conditions that make it difficult for black people to attend the latter. The "academy" denotes the university, but also the institutions (conferences and academic societies) that generate their own language, which is poorly disseminated to the broader community (Richards, Personal Interview). Richards addresses this gap in his other podcasts, *Rational Anger* and *This American Negro*, which are branded as "bridging academia and the hood," by translating his conversations between popular and specialized vocabularies.

The *Rational Anger podcast* is a space for 'Quise (Richards) and his co-hosts, Mo, Somer, and Celine, to research contemporary questions and bring the language of the student union to a broad audience. *This American Negro* puts Richards in conversation with black academics and educators whose work often exists "in an echo chamber" (Richards, Personal Interview). "I think sometimes," he says, "there's this thing with black academics, where we're [the public] just like, 'Cool, you did all this research. But are you back in the community that you did this research on? Are there active changes that are going on in these spaces?'" (Personal Interview). Within these conversations, Richards addresses this distinction directly through critical analysis of the reception of blackness in media, which guides his projects.

Figure 10. "Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kenya Barris, & Black Male Identity (feat. Mark Williams)."
YouTube, uploaded by Marquise Davon Productions. 25 May 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXL3ZUw29E0.

This still from a YouTube discussion of the show (Figure 10) comes from one of the many conversations that critically examine both the popularization of Blackness and the limitations of black celebrity perspectives. Contemporary media, Richards says, is "black-splaining for a lot of people, because I think there's commodification of being woke or, or they'll call it 'cause-based marketing' for them in social media marketing space" (Personal Interview). In contrast, Richards and his co-hosts examine the work of popular authors to determine where exploration becomes commodification.
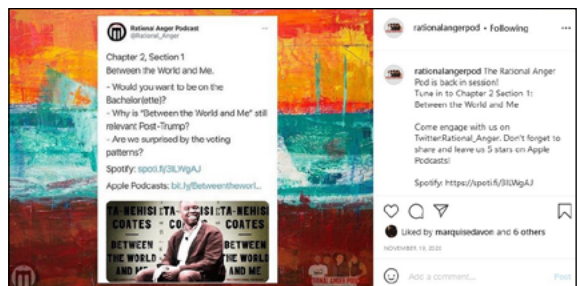
Figure 11. "Between the World and Me."
@rationalangerpod. Instagram. 19 Nov. 2020.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CHx2l8enoVG/.

The discussion advertised in Figure 11 concerns the ubiquity of Ta-Nehisi Coates's explorations of Blackness as suffering as a particularly middle-class perspective, marketed towards White audiences (Richards et al.). These perspectives, they argue, contribute to a capitalist identity politics in which black identity is treated as property, which can often threaten group solidarity:

> It's just an interesting dialogue, because the rise of Black Lives Matter happened, and then all of these shows came out. Now we're seeing how art can also inform how people's relationship with blackness either makes them comfortable or makes them uncomfortable. Because now they're just like, "Ooh, do I fall into this thing?" (Richards, Personal Interview)

These concerns about the commodification of Blackness, along with Richards's engagement with academic exclusion, show him wrestling with the types of exclusion and inclusion that inhibit collective social action. Both podcasts aim to bridge the gap between worlds in order to provide a common platform for cooperation across classes.

A similar tension emerges in Richards's use of the language of social media marketing, which he subverts by grounding it in concrete community action rather than cultivating audiences. Richards frequently uses the terms "disruption" and "thought leader," both cornerstones of Silicon Valley vocabulary often used to give a slick sheen to platform capitalism. They form a language of capitalist subjectivity that frames our activity in terms of digital interaction. Richards's usage weaves this vocabulary into the community:

> I think thought leaders are meant to be agitators. Influencers can sometimes communicate what the agitators are trying to do. But sometimes influencers just stop at the surface level. And I don't think that that's always a bad thing […]. However, if influencers are just doing this to catch quick bag, or they're doing this because this is a trend right now, people are able to quickly see like, "ooh, you're not actually about us because you haven't been doing this work." (Personal Interview)

In this analysis, community evaluates the effectiveness of leadership, not vice versa. Here again, two worlds, the community and the market, are contrasted, with authority given to the people. In addition, Richards notes how the digital activist knowledge of social media is often used to work around the platforms' attempts to block information. "When a lot of people are sharing information on Breonna Taylor," he recounts, "Instagram, Facebook was not sharing those posts as often. So, you had to actively […] override the system of just like, 'Hey, I'm about to share this thing, make sure you tag five other people or make sure you share this in your story'" (Personal Interview). These techniques contribute to the global reach of information that keeps members of the diaspora informed about struggles in our respective nations. Like witnessing, this engagement with social media points towards a cultural intervention that reappropriates capitalist logics for collective action.

Lubin's work also aims at interventions in professional culture that make the effects of material inequalities and power dynamics visible through his emphasis on identity. His efforts focus on how the power dynamics of therapeutic spaces affect the lives of clients. Representation, understood in terms of his project, is important because, "you're talking about a group of people who often are coming into a therapeutic space, [and] they're being asked all of these questions by somebody who

Figure 12. "Fabrice Lubin." @forrealtherapy. "What Blackness Looks Like." Instagram. 29 May 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyGJmFDmaW/.

holds power over their lives. They can hospitalize them. They can be the person that determines whether or not their children have access to them" (Lubin, Personal Interview). This approach runs counter to the homogenic framing of white clinical spaces he diagnoses in his musings. For Lubin, therapy is a "cultural experience," meaning both that clients come in with some knowledge of the therapeutic process, but also that the process often requires awareness of the shared experiences that are not validated in White clinical spaces. In these cases, Lubin uses his experiences as a Haitian American male and as a client to discuss the specific dimensions of racialized experience that connect themselves to broader psychological life (Figure 12):

> When I'm talking about these things [...] I'm thinking about all the shit that they never mentioned. All the subtle things that would have made a difference for me. [...] "What is it like, Fabrice, to be in grad school and to be the only black male in your cohort? Do you ever feel out of place? Do you ever feel paranoid when you're working with people? [...] Do you think that any of that has to do with what it's like growing up as a first-generation immigrant named Fabrice?" (Personal Interview)

Like Richards, Lubin is working with clients to find a language and techniques drawn from shared experiences, which are often tied to identity. Understanding the tendency of elitism in clinical practice, he errs towards professionally guided collective responsibility, which gives the clients agency over the practice. The ideal of collective engagement extends to the building itself (Figure 13).

When constructing the For Real Therapy offices, Lubin was intentional about building the space based on the needs of his clients rather than marketing an ideal of therapy. "I wasn't going to misappropriate like, Eastern imagery from any other place," he says. "I was going to [try] to make it [with the idea of], 'What does meditation look like straight up in Chicago?'" (Lubin, Personal Interview). As the space took shape, the clients were given specific input on the walls (Personal Interview). He recalls that "One of the things I would say is, I ask people directly for

what they want. And then I have the freedom to say, 'Okay, well, we'll do that,'" he recounts (Personal Interview). Such community orientation centers the clients through a focus on service; however, this emphasis on serving particular communities can threaten profits. Because he and his clinicians aim to cultivate a shared community, this may mean not having a full caseload. In addition, the desire for a particular community may exclude clients without the money or access to private therapy. To address this issue, Lubin speaks publicly with organizations like Chicago Minds and Hip-Hop, Coffee, and Mental Health to model and discuss therapeutic practices. In addition, he continuously works on models to subsidize therapy for those who cannot afford it (Personal Interview). These moves aim to close the gap between customer and community member, but require attention and intention to ensure that the practice remains rooted.

Conclusion

Self-archiving is an activity that brings individuals together into communities that, when well organized, can serve as political counterpublics. Whether they are community organizations or political parties, they can bear witness to the global struggles against anti-blackness, connecting individuals to see their concerns reflected in the concerns of others. This story is consistent with the history of global Black politics. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*, narrates a history of Black radical politics that struggles against the imaginary of its socio-political contexts. He ends with a discussion of Black surrealism as a global effort to open experience beyond our sociological conditions (157-94). In our current conjuncture, we see that global capital adapts itself to societal changes, infecting and hollowing out movements to dismantle its systems. Universities continue to educate "colonized elites," that work between imperialist ways of knowing and liberationist ideals, hoping to effect positive change. These efforts establish an ongoing need for emerging community leaders to avoid elite capture.

In addition, there is a need to avoid the essentialization of struggle as an ontological feature of the lives of black people. There is a sense in the United States that black people are not simply born of struggle, but that they are born to struggle, and that the evils they face are an inevitable and necessary societal feature. The tensions explored by Richards and Lubin show how this framing of our experience generates a script of how the material world operates and traps us as we try to escape it. Their projects show that struggle cannot be naturalized or essentialized. It has to be faced materially in the everyday decisions we make and the intentions we bring to our work. While we are enculturated into white supremacist patriarchal capitalist forms of language, perception, and knowledge, if our actions are grounded in the community, we can tip the scales of our action in favor of the few rather than the many. When our stories are not being told, we can generate platforms that bring us together to tell them. When algorithms block communication, we can use knowledge of the system to work around walls. The key is to not treat the platform as total, but to realize its limitations and purposes, and act with the knowledge that its image is not its reality.

Avoiding elite capture requires leaders to not simply declare themselves as part of the community. Collective action requires working within organizations, suspending the ego to work in tandem with others as a way of resisting elite liberal capitalist subjectivity. Where the latter prioritizes the ideology of the few working for the good of the many, who may not understand their actions, the former means aligning oneself in critical dialog with the community, prioritizing collective action over individual prestige. Even when we are working online, we are working with people (Richards, Personal Interview).

Richards's and Lubin's projects show how online work has facilitated in-person collective organizing between activists on the ground (Personal Interview). Folks are sharing strategies and ideals for liberation that move from online to offline, leading to genuine collective action. Lubin reminds us that the tools we have used have always been compromised (Personal Interview). This means we have to be intentional about our community impact and must be guided by those we serve as we serve them. Both give me an orientation to start with a rich intersectional view. "My politics," says Richards, "centers the dark-skinned black trans woman who is disabled … in a low-income area, if you want the full layout of all these intersections that go" (Personal Interview). This form of centering means thinking of how these folks would be materially affected by an action, and then moving outward. It is more than a question of "who gets to speak and who is heard." It also means speaking truth to power, whether that power be law enforcement, government officials, our colleagues, or one another.

Our perspectives can expand ideally without a concern for material circumstances. Human beings historically fail to realize the ideals that shape their identities and societies. The number of nations that

proclaim liberty despite widespread oppression testify to that fact. Our task is to work concretely with the community, thinking of their material reality, and aligning ourselves with them in struggle to compose life-worlds that break with systems grounded in oppression and exploitation.

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Closing the Gap: Graphic Narratives and the Archive of Afro-Diasporic Resistance— A Conversation between Breena Nuñez, Marcelo D'Salete, and André Diniz

Conducted and arranged by JASMIN WROBEL and DUSTIN BREITENWISCHER

Introduction

In recent years, graphic narratives have become a crucial space for Black artistic resistance and social contestation across the Americas; a development that is noteworthy in at least two ways. Historically, comics and caricatures have played a decisive and likewise deplorable role in the reproduction and circulation of ethnic misattributions and systemic racism, a fact that becomes even more apparent when one considers the specific visual registers of the medium that have traditionally been based on caricaturesque exaggerations. This specific feature, however, is now being used to de- and reframe hegemonic and White supremacist visual culture in the great variety of stylistic devices that the multimodal language of comics and graphic narratives has to offer. At the same time, the lack of Black and Brown characters in such narratives—apart from one-dimensional sidekicks—is being refuted by a new generation of artists who dedicate their work to the recovery and visualization of Black (hi)stories and experiences.

Indeed, the growing transnational awareness and recognition of comic books that feature Black and Brown protagonists in the African diaspora is striking. Brazilian comic book artist Marcelo D'Salete's *Cumbe* (2014) and *Angola Janga* (2017)—graphic narratives that deal with the resistance of enslaved men and women in colonial Brazil—have by now been published in Portugal, France, Italy, Austria, Spain, Poland, Turkey, and the United States, where *Cumbe* (translated as *Run for It:*

Stories of Slaves Who Fought for Their Freedom by Andrea Rosenberg and published by Fantagraphics in 2017) won the prestigious Eisner Award in the category "Best U.S. Edition of International Material" in 2018. D'Salete's earlier works, the graphic narratives *Noite Luz* (2008) and *Encruzilhada* (2011) about the urban peripheries of São Paulo, are not only in direct dialogue with his later narratives (in the sense of an inverted continuity), but also with André Diniz's award-winning *Morro da Favela* (2011; translated as *Picture a Favela* by Jethro Soutar and published by SelfMadeHero, 2012), a graphic biography that tells the story of self-trained photographer Maurício Hora and has been translated into English, French, Polish, and Spanish. Hora grew up in harsh conditions in Rio de Janeiro's first favela community, Morro da Providência (formerly, Morro da Favela). In *Morro da Favela*, André Diniz not only addresses these struggles, but also shows how Hora's creative engagement with the favela and its inhabitants leads to quite a different and more nuanced image than is most commonly presented in international media.[1] In contrast to D'Salete and Diniz, Guatemalan-Salvadoran cartoonist Breena Nuñez (who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area) engages in a decidedly more trans-American perspective in her work. In her zine-influenced, autobiographical comics strips, she explores the nuances of Black and Brown experiences in the Latinx community in the United States while contributing to a queer-feminist negotiation of identity. What connects the works by Breena Nuñez, André Diniz, and Marcelo D'Salete is that their graphic narratives revolve around a gap, a blank space, in comics and visual culture. Their stories highlight and explore the unknown, the ignored, the unseen and invisible, thus offering a counter-hegemonic visual archive that challenges and disrupts traditional (i. e., Western) historiography.

The following interview with Breena Nuñez, Marcelo D'Salete, and André Diniz was conducted between April and June of 2021 on several occasions, and the editors would like to thank the artists for their openness, for their generous explanations, and for allowing them to reproduce selected images in this issue.[2]

Localizing the Gap: Absence as Inspiration

Breena Nuñez:

My source of inspiration to create comics comes from two places: first, remembering what it felt like to be a child who was hungry for knowledge and truth. When I make comics about these topics, I notice how I'm using the medium as a form of therapy to help that younger self to feel seen and listened to by my words and pictures. Comics are another way for us to archive our experiences and stories, especially when it comes to anything that we want to leave behind: I intend to create as a response to feeding a need for my younger self who has not seen any

[1] Regarding André Diniz's *Morro da Favela*, see Javiera Irribarren Ortiz's contribution to this issue.

[2] Marcelo D'Salete's and André Diniz's answers were translated from Portuguese into English by Jasmin Wrobel. The guest editors have decided to leave out their questions and instead curate a conversation between the artists. All footnotes have been added by the guest editors.

representation or stories that have some sort of nuances about what it means to exist as an Afrodescendiente from the United States, something that's really specific and a type of identity that is an anomaly to what it means to be a Latinx or a person of Latin American descent. I have been hungry for something that is not only just Central American but that talks more specifically about embracing Blackness. Archiving, for me, is rooted in my practice, because I do want to leave something behind for the generations that come after me, so that they also don't forget, so that they don't have to feel ashamed for their curls, their skin, their culture, just to let them know that it's taking a lot of us time to fully accept our Blackness. Anti-Blackness has become really large within Latin America and for Latin Americans who live all over the world who identify as Afrodescendiente. Comics as an art, it's not just another way for me to express love, but it's another way to remind people that we're here. We're fighting against erasure and colonization and we do it with so much love and tenderness.

Figure 1. Breena Nuñez, "Self-Portrait"

Secondly, I see how many cartoonists of color from the Bay Area have used comics and zines to share their stories, and oftentimes these stories are told through memoir or diary comics. I tend to feel really held by their stories and that feeling is something I want to give to readers who look like me or who share a similar story like mine. I want them to feel that they are not alone in the ways White supremacy has isolated you, or alone in how you have grown to love your Blackness.

Marcelo D'Salete:

My own incentive to draw comics connects with Breena's points in several ways. You could say that my comic art was initiated by the perception of a certain absence of a Black experience in the arts, an absence

I noticed in films, books, and conversations with friends—but especially in comics.

Figure 2. Marcelo D'Salete, "Portrait by Rafael Roncato"

3 The Brazilian literary group Quilombhoje was founded in 1980 by Cuti, Oswaldo de Camargo, Paulo Colina, Abelardo Rodrigues, and others, with the objective of discussing the Afro-Brazilian experience in literature. The group's name is a portmanteau of the words "quilombo," referring to settlements of runaway slaves in colonial Brazil, and "hoje," meaning "today." In 1982, with the entrance of Esmeralda Ribeiro, Márcio Barbosa, Miriam Alves, and Oubi Inaê Kibuko, the group took over the organization of *Cadernos Negros* ("Black Notebooks"), an Afro-diasporic literature series that had been launched in 1978. The writer, researcher, and Black movement militant Márcio Barbosa currently shares the direction of Quilombhoje and the organization of the *Cadernos Negros* series with the writer Esmeralda Ribeiro.

Later, when I was a student, I experienced a kind of key moment in downtown São Paulo. I went out to see a dance and theater performance and came across a book stall with a huge range of titles about Black literature in Brazil. There were some copies of the *Cadernos Negros* series, by Quilombhoje, works by Márcio Barbosa, and others.[3] When I came across this literature, I understood that this Black and Afro-diasporic universe also existed in Brazilian literature, beyond North American literature and cinema.

Little by little, I realized how absent these Afro-diasporic narratives were from formal education, television, and other spaces of visual media where they only appeared as stereotypes: they were the "exotic" elements within a certain context and rarely presented Black people as round, complex characters.

In my comics, taking up these Black and peripheral narratives in all their complexity became the crucial point. And, of course, at that moment, in the early 2000s, I started to meet a lot of other students who had similar interests. I realized that this was not just the interest of a kid from the outskirts of São Paulo, but it was actually a concern of many other people to reconstruct complex Black and diasporic narratives. It is fundamental for us to resituate the image of Black people in Brazil today, to understand their history, beyond racism and discrimination.

The lack of the archive that Breena insinuated, the gap, the unspoken, the "crack" in the document, these are precisely the spaces where the artist's creation and exploration begins. It is in this space that we can generally create instigating narratives, beyond the original record, beyond the fact. Furthermore, fiction makes it possible to connect documents or facts that are not necessarily related historically.

André Diniz:

The absence of certain narratives in Brazilian cultural life, highlighted by Marcelo, was also a motivation for my work on *Morro da Favela*, even if I'm telling this story from a different position. Comics are generally seen as a visual medium in the first place, but my premise for creating graphic narratives is to have a good story to tell. So, what attracted and inspired me most in this case was the life story of Brazilian photographer Maurício Hora and his lucid vision of the favela Morro da Providência—its whole social context.

Figure 3. André Diniz, "Self-Portrait"

Another aspect that motivated me is that favelas, in fiction, are often chosen as a topic or scenery to show scenes of gunfire and violence, like a "Brazilian Wild West." Besides, it is a theme that arouses the interest of readers outside Brazil. In Maurício's story, I saw an opportunity to show another vision. When I learned about him and his work, I was just one more "outsider," without any right to talk about favela life and even less so to transpose the favela and its people into scenes, dialogues, and drawings. It was also the first time that I "adapted" a life story of someone still alive, and whose deceased relatives had controversial lives, so the initial barrier I felt was high.

Talking about the favelas in Brazil, especially in Rio de Janeiro, is a much more complex subject than it might first appear. For obvious rea-

sons, the first issue that comes to mind is the glaring social inequality. Some of the largest favelas in the country, ironically, are located next to upscale neighborhoods.

As someone who creates stories and characters and who seeks and enjoys the particularities of each and every one of them, whether they are fictional or real, I believe that one of the main obstacles to an understanding, and even an approximation of these different worlds, is the generalization of an entire part of the population using one or two derogatory words: "poor" and "favelado." Behind these labels, there are millions of different people with millions of different universes, with different experiences, including the issues that, at a first glance, might stand out the most, such as economic, cultural, and professional factors. Let me illustrate the existing prejudices with a little anecdote: I remember when Maurício and I, after finishing the book, were invited to launch the French edition in Paris. The publisher, a contact of Maurício's who would be hosting him, his then-girlfriend, everyone wanted to know if we would be going and coming back on the same flight, if we would be together the whole time, asking me to guide and look after Maurício during the whole trip. The idea of a "favelado" in Paris was worrisome to everyone involved. I, the author, White, middle-class, would have the mission of "guiding" Maurício, the "Black slum-dweller," through the "first-world" city. I then had to explain that Maurício already had been to Paris years before for an exhibition of his work, while I, on the contrary, had never traveled to Europe.

Subversive Potential, Counterculture, and Freedom of Creation in Comic Art

Marcelo D'Salete:

Comics have an enormous potential to create visual critical approaches and "noise" within hegemonic power structures. I imagine this noise as something not expected within a certain work. A scene or even a universe of creation that escapes the expectations and contours of the public-context-work relation. It would also be something that escapes certain genres. These kinds of narratives that bring, in an instigating way, new ways of dealing with and thinking about a problem, works that present new questions, new disruptions.

In the nineteenth century, in Brazil, there was Angelo Agostini for example, expressing a direct critique of the empire and slavery in his sequential image stories, even if, on the other hand, he could not completely overcome his own classist and ethnic prejudices towards the Black population.[4] But what matters most here is that he created sort of counter-hegemonic comics already in the nineteenth century.

Today, in much of the production of industrial comics, for which the medium is most famous, this critical potential, the questioning of hegemonic structures, is not so evident. And yet, there are comic authors today from very different backgrounds. In my opinion, this diversity of authors and creative forms is the most interesting aspect of the recent comic production.

André Diniz:

Let me take up Marcelo's last point. When I started to publish my first works in the form of fanzines, in the mid-90s, the label "comics" seemed to close all doors. Not that they had anything against the medium itself, but there was a lot of disregard for a *Brazilian* making his own comics. We were limited to a few specialized stores, a very restricted number of readers, there were rarely any events and festivals, and there was a lack of interest and also respect on the part of most people, bookstores, institutions, media, etc. The simple act of making comics in Brazil, even nowadays, still has an air of counterculture. A large part of the editions, for example, are still independent editions (even if financed by government programs or crowdfunding campaigns), sold by the author her/himself at events and on the internet. A big difference between the 90s and today is that, besides the current number of releases and authors being incomparably larger, Brazilian comics artists in general have woken up to what I believe is the greatest asset of comics: freedom of creation. If, back then, authors were still stuck to commercial conventions that made no sense for independent editions (cross-over between different characters, 22-page stories with "To be continued…"

4 In the nineteenth century, which marks the birth of what we understand as "comics", Italian Brazilian Angelo Agostini created two of the first illustrated stories considered as comics worldwide—*As Aventuras de Nhô Quim ou Impressões de uma Viagem à Corte* (1869) and *As Aventuras de Zé Caipora* (1883). His name and importance for national comics culture in Brazil gave the inspiration for the "Prêmio Angelo Agostini," awarded annually by the *Associação de Quadrinhistas e Caricaturistas do Estado de São Paulo* ("São Paulo Comics Artists and Caricaturists Association"), and for the creation of the "Dia do Quadrinho Nacional" ("National Comics Day"), celebrated on January 30, the date of the publication of *As Aventuras de Nhô Quim ou Impressões de uma Viagem à Corte.*

at the end), today what reigns is a creative freedom that is not concerned with certain approaches, themes, and commercial formats aimed at the general public.

Let's take the film as a contrasting example here! Making a film is a great responsibility for its producers and directors. It involves several professionals, large sums of money, not to mention that a bad film can end the careers of those involved (even so, it is possible to see breakthroughs of daring and courage in works that escape the triviality of blockbusters). Comics do not have these limitations. In a single day, it is possible to make a short story without spending any money, and to publish it on the internet before sunset. You also don't need locations, costumes, makeup, you don't even need to consider the laws of physics! The difference between making a realistic comic and a highly imaginative one is solely the author's creative mind. All these factors bring a huge potential to comics as a contesting, anarchistic, and subversive medium.

Breena Nuñez:

I also still see subversive potential in sequential art. Especially if we consider that we were in lockdown for a good portion of last year and still this year [2020-2021, ed. note] where I feel like what's subversive to me is the way comics folks were able to publish their work without having to go through the needs of a publishing house or some kind of syndicate. As somebody who has been part of the zine community since ca. 2013, for me it's the most abundant source of original comics, because they tend to have a lot of autobiographical and political material. In regard to the representational potential that predestine comics: I think a lot about my friend Daniel Parada, an Indigenous Salvadoran artist who makes these comics called *Zotz*. It's amazing what he does, because his comics are actually pretty subversive—they reflect his imagination on what Mesoamerica would have been like if the Spanish hadn't colonized those lands, and he is creating this whole universe based on the mythologies that are a part of Mesoamerica. He has visited a couple of classes of mine at San Francisco State University and has been so inspiring to my students because he has introduced the idea of how Mesoamerican "comics" are the first forms of comics that this continent has probably seen. There is definitely evidence of characters presented in Mayan codices, pottery art, and this kind of touches on the question of archiving again and on what our ancestors did for so many years and across world cultures, creating an archiving history. Moments in human history have always been archived through the means of illustration, and Mayan people have a very visual, heavy language that was really sophisticated, the way our ancestors communicated with each other. Daniel Parada also points out that there are a kind of speech balloons to show that there is a dialogue, a conversation that was happening between the characters.

To me, this is another form of resistance, against these ideas and narratives that Indigenous people have had no idea how to live in a "civilized" society, that they "needed" to be colonized and have their selves stripped and removed from their language, their belief system, in the name of "modernization," in order to be adopted into a more "civilized" society. And I think if we continue to look at other world cultures pre-contact—and even today—there were and there are always narratives that are represented visually, not in the means of comic books or print, but definiteley through other things like clothing, pottery art, jewelry, hair cuts, everything. There is some sort of narrative that is being shared with us, and we might not belong to a culture that automatically understands a certain piece of visual narrative, but the fact that it exists and that is being delivered through some visual means just shows that it is kind of disrupting the way our Westernized perspective has assumed that the only way for us to really fully understand a story is only through a book, through literature, a conventional comic book.

André Diniz:

When talking about this potential, described as "noise" by Marcelo, the different media and formats in comics play an important role. We have a variety of media and formats ranging from the classic newspaper strip format, which today has evolved into webcomics that are mainly disseminated through social networks, to the 100-, 200-page albums that take at least a few months to be written and drawn, and they may take a year in the publisher's queue to be published (not to mention that a reader may buy the book two, three years later). So, when we talk about the urgency of comics in the face of social issues, these different paces mean that each format has a very different timeframe. Since a webcomic can reach the reader on the same day as a news event, it has the potential to follow the unfolding of facts practically live. It works well with a nimble drawing, and if authors don't get their message across the way they intended, they can achieve this in the following days with another strip. The album, on the other hand, requires a more refined and slower work (and this does not make it more "noble" than the strip, nor does it require more talent—to say a lot with only a few drawn lines is often more difficult) and a longer "life cycle" (ideally it should be "current" both if read today and if read ten years later, at least). Thus, the focus is different. It becomes more interesting to address current issues, but not necessarily those of today. The two paths (there are other formats, of course, but I have highlighted two extremes here) complement each other when they oppose a society that both demands urgent changes and needs its vision, already crystallized and solidified over decades or even centuries, to be dissolved little by little.

Breena Nuñez:

This also just reminds me of a student who had a really inventive approach to making a comic for her final project. She created a sort of comic scroll made out of cardboard and paper, crafting the paper to look like flowers, and it was a visual history, among other things, of her experiences and relationship with Black hair and of how Black hair has been criminalized and demonized within the United States. There are also moments when she expresses how she fell in love with her hair, and you have to literally interact with this comic to learn the history. There are some points that were being accompanied by visuals which were these illustrations of flowers, some of them were in bloom, representing the growth of how she learned to embrace her hair. It was really interesting, because this also makes me realize that I consider myself to be very "Western" in the sense that I collect comic books, because that's how I consume them, in book form. But what if we challenge that and create comics that are structural, sculptural, three-dimensional, and made out of other materials?

The subversiveness that comes with that is related to the question [of] how we can make comics even more accessible—you still have to buy them, and when you buy a graphic novel it's quite an investment for some people. And not everyone is able to afford the printed version of the copy. How can a comic be even more public than being accessible in the public library?

André Diniz:

This is an interesting point that I would like to reconnect to the question of production. Unfortunately, in most cases, comics with a social approach are still works made by those who, to some degree, are more inserted in society. As versatile as comics are as a language, of course factors such as education and culture, money to invest in drawing material, books, courses, and computer, time available to study and create, are factors that help a lot, and when you don't have any of these, the obstacle is greater, even though it is possible to create a comic with a pen and a sheet of paper. This is a pity, because Brazilian comics would be greatly enriched by this new group of authors, the ones who actually live in the scenarios that are the themes of many works created by artists who do not know this reality up close. If we had a movement to bring workshops on comics and the creation of fanzines and webcomics to communities in need, we would probably solve this problem. From a sheet of paper, when cut in half, when its two halves are joined together, folded and stapled in the center, we have a small eight-page notebook. With pages measuring one-fourth of the space of the sheet, with this single sheet being printed front and back, a small eight-page copy emerges, where one would be the cover and the other seven pages

would bring the comic to the reader. Printing 100, 200 copies in this way is perfectly viable, because the cost would be minimal and the editions would be quickly created and easily distributed. Something like *literatura de cordel*,[5] so typical of Northeastern Brazil, where small editions with poetry and woodcut images (printed in a rudimentary way to maintain tradition) talk about daily life in an agile, efficient, and creative way, mixing poetry, engravings, and humor.

Contesting Anti-Black Stereotypes and White Supremacy in Comics Art

Breena Nuñez:

Thinking a bit more about comics and diversity: I feel like now we're seeing more nuances of Blackness in cultural productions and that this existence is not monolithic or contained in certain stereotypes. Black people, especially Black women, have often been and still are written as characters to be strong, so that they can be the emotional support system for the protagonist. But I grew up as a quiet and shy kid who was obsessed with watching cartoons, anime, playing in the school band, and playing in the soccer team so I wouldn't have to do P. E. [Phycial Education]. What I hope I'm adding to the discourse with my comics is that there is no "one way" to exist as a Black person, and that some people had (and are probably still having) a very difficult relationship with embracing their Blackness. As an Afro-Salvadoran from the United States, I understood that I would be racialized as someone who was mixed with Black heritage or who was from Ethiopia, Colombia, or Puerto Rico, yet I was quick to deny it because children already learn at an early age in the Latinx culture that anything associated with Blackness was not just "good" despite how much we consume Black culture.

Marcelo D'Salete:

Thinking about racism, stereotypes, and visual archives, there is quite an abundant production in Western art about Indigenous Peoples of America, Asia, and Africa at the beginning of maritime expansion and modernity, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A little later, in the nineteenth century, we witness the "birth" of modern comic strips. In this same period, there is a huge dispute between different political groups about the abolition of slavery. This counts for many parts of the Americas. Now, in this period, along with the birth of comics, we have the development of caricatures as a whole new graphic form that often transformed the Black population— people about to become free—into something close to animalistic (according to the White supremacist imagery of the time).

5 *Literatura de cordel* ("string literature") refers to inexpensively produced booklets or pamphlets that contain mostly poetry, tales, or folk songs, while the booklets are usually illustrated with woodcuts and hung from strings to display them at street markets to potential readers, especially in the Brazilian Northeast.

We are still in the much-needed process of overcoming these ways of representing Black people and other ethnic groups. This process shows up in comics, but also in other types of artistic expression. In the last decades, we have made a lot of progress. But we also have to be very careful that we do not end up with a conservative update of these supposedly overcome stereotypes.

André Diniz:

All cultural languages (and spoken language itself, of course) are laden with prejudices, stereotypes, and pejorative and segregating views of social, racial, and gender identities, in ways that perhaps only future generations will know how to identify properly. Unfortunately, these factors are very strong in comics, and I have some theories about what may have made comics and cartoons particularly fertile ground for these distortions.

Firstly, an essential ingredient in the language of comics is synthesis. Text and drawings need to occupy the same space, so neither should outdo the other. There are time gaps between one panel and another, so a single panel often needs to represent more "time" and events than, for example, a photograph, which captures a single instant. Drawing itself makes use, to a greater or lesser degree, of synthesis. The more stylized it is, the more the forms and what they represent are being simplified. A dot with a circle around it replaces the real image of an eye and its precise curves, eyelashes, etc. A window is represented by a simple square. And this is beautiful: it is a creative reconstruction of the real world through the eyes of the respective author. The trap is when this simplification uses prejudices to have an immediate impression on the reader. Thus, someone poor gets disheveled hair, torn clothes, dirty and smelly looks, as if there could not be poverty and dignity at the same time (and quite often this figure is Black). Women are often being reduced to two types: either the beautiful young woman with long hair and a statuesque body, or the woman over fifty, overweight and bad-tempered. In the same way, a bandit will have a badly-done beard, a prominent chin, and a big nose; a priest will necessarily be a fat, bald middle-aged man. Fortunately, I am talking about something that has changed a lot recently, I think in comics all over the world and certainly in Brazilian comics: limited and unjust patterns that lack not only common sense, but also creativity. It is not about picturing what has been witnessed in other comics for decades, but what we see around us now.

Still, the world you see in a comic book is a world a hundred percent created or recreated by a cartoonist and her or his vision of everything and everyone, and the distortions and exaggerations of her or his way of seeing the world will be reflected, even if in an unconscious way: a female character and her gestures drawn by a man; a poor person's house drawn by a well-to-do artist; a remote town portrayed by someone who lives in a metropolis.

Aesthetic References and Modes of (Self-)Archiving

Marcelo D'Salete:

My latest graphic novel *Angola Janga* was the result of many years of research. In fact, it is based on a long process of building my own internal self-knowledge. I realized during this research that there was a universe of facts about Palmares, and about the Black population in the seventeenth century, that most people didn't know.[6] These facts are very relevant to understand Brazil today and especially its Black population. This process of discovery involved learning about and reading the sources, but also reimagining them for today's readers. There was a need to recontextualize those archives in the form of fiction, trying to bring all the complexity and potentiality of fiction to those stories.

The graphic novels *Noite Luz*, *Encruzilhada* (Figure 5), *Cumbe* (Figure 6) and *Angola Janga* are, in my view, connected. They end up being part of a spiral process of knowledge about Brazil in the past and present. There is a line of nuances to understand the Afro-diasporic experience in Brazil of three centuries ago and connect it with the Brazil of the last decades. There is a perverse continuity between these two ends. We urgently need to untie the knots of this history of violence and subjugation.

It is amazing to see the reach of *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* outside Brazil. I think it is related to the interest of people from different countries in learning more about Brazil, but from a different perspective, a perspective that highlights the Black protagonists in the country's narrative. The books show another topic little known abroad—the formation of mocambos[7] and quilombos by resistant Black men and women. These stories are probably being told in some translated academic texts, but not in such a dynamic and accessible language that comics (and other visual media) can offer.

I am very happy to note that the female figures of my narratives, Jô (*Encruzilhada*; Figure 7), Calu (*Cumbe*; Figure 8), or Andala and Dara (*Angola Janga*), have gained importance in the eyes of readers. Part of the texts that I have used address the role of Black women in the colonial period. I just tried to follow in the same direction. I imagine that in *Cumbe* this was developed in a very organic way with each narrative. In the case of *Angola Janga*, in the middle of the book's development, I realized that the documents and my narrative still included few women. That was the moment to revise much of the book project and alter some important passages.

When I started creating comics, my visual references were mainly urban. I had the habit of creating scenes involving streets, alleys, buildings, etc. This is clearly visible in *Noite Luz* and *Encruzilhada* (Figure 7). The elaboration of *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* forced me to rethink my references. Revisiting historical paintings by Frans Post or Albert Eckhout, as well as more recent comic strip artists, was very relevant for the elaboration of this universe.[8]

6 Both *Cumbe* and *Angola Janga* unfold against the historical background of the Quilombo dos Palmares, a settlement of men and women who escaped slavery in colonial Brazil (ca. 1605-1694). Located in Pernambuco, it became the most important center of resistance against the Portuguese, led by Zumbi (1655-1695), who was a quilombola leader and the last king of Palmares. Among Afro-Brazilians, Zumbi dos Palmares's heroic resistance has long made him a symbol for freedom and an important reference for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black political movements in Brazil. November 20, the day Zumbi died, is celebrated as *Dia da Consciência Negra* ("Black Awareness Day") throughout Brazil.

7 The term "mocambo" ("hut") is often used as a synonym for "quilombo," but refers normally to a smaller settlement.

8 The Dutch painters Frans Post (1612-1680) and Albert Eckhout (1610-1665) were among the first European artists who painted landscapes and scenes from Brazil's northeastern regions during and after the period of Dutch Brazil (1630-1654).
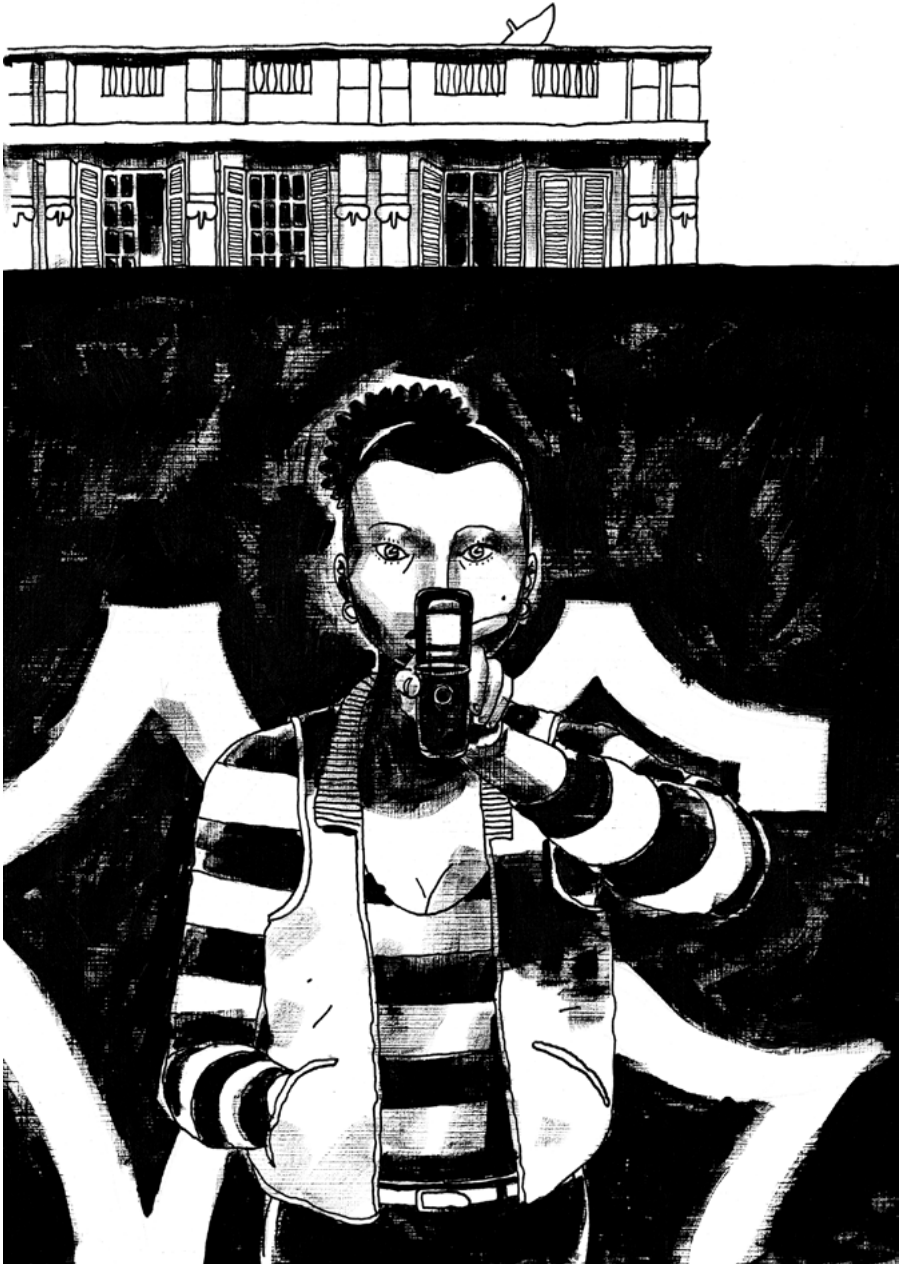
Figure 5. Marcelo D'Salete, Dora from "93079482,"[9] *Encruzilhada*

9 The image shows Dora, the protagonist of the short story "93079482," but this specific full-page panel serves as a closure image for the whole book.

Figure 6. Marcelo D'Salete, Valu in "calunga," *Cumbe*

Figure 7. Marcelo D'Salete, Jô in "Brother," *Encruzilhada*

Figure 8. Marcelo D'Salete, Calu in "Sumidouro," *Cumbe*

Breena Nuñez:

I think because I didn't see enough of myself and other types of Central Americans depicted in the mainstream, I ended up drawing myself in my comics just to show up as a character who deals with many experiences that don't often get to be discussed in comics, and it's also been a powerful way for me to connect with other Black folk from different parts of the diaspora. The idea of writing and drawing myself circles back to the need to challenge the stereotypes we face as well as wanting to show folks that Black Central Americans or Afrodescendientes exist, and that I'm not any less proud of being Black, Salvadoran, or Guatemalan. My comics touch on how mestizaje can be harmful to those who are Black or Afrodescendientes because it forces us to negate our identities in order to be able to feel like we are a part of Latinidad.

I feel like, when I look back at my earliest comic, "They Call Me Morena… For a Reason," my style was really different. I think I was still trying to figure out who I was as a cartoonist, and what my aesthetic was going to be. I took a break from reading comics from childhood—I would say like around ten or twelve years old—and I stopped reading and just dedicated my life to music for a long time, because this was another dream I had, I wanted to be a concert musician. But I fell in love with comics again in college, and the titles that really pulled me back were *Love and Rockets* (since 1981) by Jaime Hernandez, who is a Mexican American artist based in Southern California,[10] and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003), as well as *Blankets* (2003) by Craig Thompson, and all these narratives I realize now kind of represent intersectional experiences that I have been able to access, when it comes to finding books that represent feminism, protest, questioning and critiquing religious institutions, and finding some sort of subculture with People of Color being depicted and drawn in really honest and authentic ways. So, in my earliest comics I definitely wanted to look "Jaime Hernándezesque." I just love the way he draws bodies, especially female or women-identifying bodies, because they just look like all of my friends and family. There are also all those different ethnicities that he beautifully represents, and these are really people that are from *his* community. For me, I just wanted to have this kind of honesty.

When I was in this graduate program at CCA (California College of the Arts) for the MFA Comics Program, exploring my cartooning style, I was making these shorter comics, one of them with the title "Things to not Ass-Ume about Black Latinx from the US" (2018; Figure 9) and that style was more like round, bubbly, just chibby, mini characters that look a bit more friendly and approachable. I realized that I pretty much have a lot of fun when I do this style of cartooning that feels a lot lighter for me to bring up heavier themes such as racism, the awkwardness of also not belonging in the Latinx community, or feeling like nobody really sees me as Latinx because of my Blackness in my aesthetic, my physi-

10 The comic book series *Love and Rockets* is a collaborative project by Mario (b. 1953), Gilbert (b. 1957), and Jaime Hernandez (b. 1959), although each brother produces his respective stories independently.

Figure 9. Breena Nuñez, "Things to not Ass-Ume about Black Latinx from the US"

cal form. It's a way for me to feel like I can have fun with this subject matter if I just draw myself in a sort of goofy way of cartooning style. I think for me it just makes it easier for people to feel like they can witness the conversation that I have with myself, and sort of see the humor of how absurd anti-Blackness and tokenism is in the United States. In that comic where somebody assumed that I'm from Africa, I don't ever see myself drawing my personal self and other characters in a hyperrealistic form, because it just does not feel very welcoming to me and I think for me personally I tend to be drawn more to reading comics that depict really heavy subject matter, but that have a very stylized cartooning style at the same time that really pulls me in. I think this cartooning style just

allows me to be able to create also dialogue and a style of writing that feels really honest, not needing to compromise other people's feelings because there's a truth that needs to be told, and it's not often where we get to see comics that talk about race and representation and also the lack of belonging that happens to be very much a part of an experience that's specific to being Afrodescendiente.

I think my comics have personally helped me realize that racial and gender categories, which were generated in colonial discourse, never really did any justice to how I wanted to exist (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Breena Nuñez, "How Do You Translate Non-Binary?"[11]

Assimilation, unfortunately, has been such a useful tool to make us feel like we shouldn't own our Blackness, Indigeneity, or queerness for fear of being persecuted by the government. Often, I lean into memories and think about how much we're taught not to express excitement for exploring queerness or for loving our skin or our hair during childhood. What comics have been doing is imagining worlds that could be created for us, for people that have been already marginalized and seen as a disruption to White supremacy and heteronormativity as well. And there are endless possibilities of imagining that world, that reality, in your story.

André Diniz:

In my case, Maurício's photographs helped me a lot as a visual reference, although I didn't recreate any specific point portrayed by him, except for Morro da Providência's central square with its chapel and the soccer field (where, years later, the cable car was built for the 2016 Olympics which was abandoned soon after by the government). After contacting Maurício with the proposal for the comic book, I made several visits to Morro da Providência, where I had the possibility to meet Maurício's friends and neighbors, and all that experience yielded not only *Morro da Favela* but also inspired my other album *Olimpo Tropical* (2017). If I had created the graphic novel without this experience, the nuances of this whole context would have been distorted. There were people connected to the drug trade walking around heavily armed, but you understood that this was part of everyday life for the residents who were not shaken by this sight. There were old ladies sitting in the open doorway of their houses, with children playing in the street (Figure 11),

Figure 11. André Diniz, streets of Morro da Providência, *Morro da Favela*

free, something you don't see in the rest of Rio de Janeiro, much less in the richer neighborhoods, where everyone is locked up in their condos, clubs, or shopping centers, looking for some sense of security.

This doesn't mean that the favela is safe, far from it. But it is possible to understand the relationship between drug trafficking and the community. Trafficking imposes a fierce dictatorship on the residents, and anyone who disobeys its rules can be killed. On the other hand, someone who follows those rules has little to fear. The trafficants even help the community in some situations, filling a power vacuum. The real danger are the police, no matter how honest and righteous the resident, because the police treat everyone in the favelas as if they were bandits. It is an absurd distortion, but one that can be seen in the nuances that I witnessed. Today, I understand when someone from the favelas says that he or she wouldn't leave to live somewhere else. I understood this by seeing how everyone there knows each other and unites to face daily obstacles, like, for example, taking a new refrigerator to a house on the top of the hill, when the only available path is a staircase and steep and unstable earth slopes. It was this little experience in the favela that put me at ease and really inspired me to make this comic. Even when it came to putting—or not putting—a smile on a character's mouth, the local experience influenced this decision.

From the beginning of the creation of *Morro da Favela*, there were many doubts: would I divide the narrative into small stories or would I make (as I did, in the end) a single story, with a beginning, middle, and
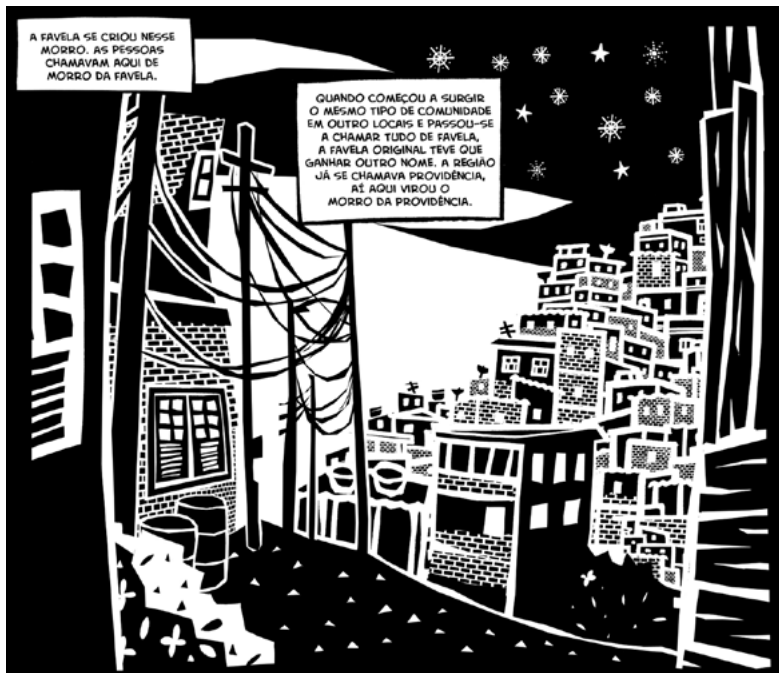
Figure 12. André Diniz, view of Morro da Providência, *Morro da Favela*

Figure 13. André Diniz, Maurício taking a picture, *Morro da Favela*

end? What would be the tone of the drawing? In short, I had a series of testimonials collected by someone who had never interviewed anyone before, and now I needed to translate all this into a comic book. And when I say "translate" it's not for nothing: the only point I had already decided from the beginning was that this would be a book *by* Maurício.

Whoever reads it would read Maurício's vision, his visual archive, without my interference. His vision of the favela, the police action, the prejudices and discrimination the residents suffer, etc. Even the decisions concerning my artwork obeyed this premise. I was going to show the favela in an iconic way, with drawings in light and dark that reminded me of woodcuttings, something very stylized. In the last section of the graphic novel, it is Maurício who actually shows the images of Morro da Providência in his own photographs.

Platforms, Formats, Collaborations, and the Challenges of the Digital

Breena Nuñez:

I've mostly been able to share my work via zines and mini-comics and saw those zine fests as radically inclusive spaces that were also the perfect place to share my work. Zine culture within itself aided me in giving myself permission to have my identity be manifested through words and images, plus zines have been able to take me to so many communities, and really felt like I have this extended family in different parts of the United States.

Last year, I started getting more comics published online and was overwhelmed by the immediate reactions to pieces like "I Exist!" (2020)

or my personal diary comics. It was a sobering moment to sit with the fact that "Oh yeah, I make webcomics too," because I tricked myself into needing to focus simply on using one platform to share my comics (but it's also because I still have this deep love for the printed book and zines). I got to be introduced to organizations like AFROOS through Afro-Salvadoran artist Carlos Lara, and he came up with this brilliant hashtag (#arteafrogosto) for the month of August to encourage other Afro-Salvadorans to create art as a way to build up to *Día de la Afrodescendencia* (which has been the one community-run festival to openly celebrate African heritage in El Salvador).[12] Despite all of the trauma that came with 2020, I felt like I've grown to know more Afro-Salvadorans here in the United States and in El Salvador because we've been able to use these platforms to use our personal narratives to resist Black erasure in the country.

The role of anthologies, which is my other point, is crucial for showing up in social movements to fill this void of not feeling seen or being heard. What better way to bring people together and to a movement than by collecting all sorts of stories and sharing them in a collection, a common archive? *Drawing Power* (2019) was an interesting book because I didn't know how to summarize everything that I had experienced when it comes to having my body tokenized and fetishized.[13] Also, having that support of editors who want you to be heard, who want to give you advise on how to do the writing or strengthening the point you want to get across to your readers is very valuable.

Drawing Power was necessary at the time, and I'm sure it still is. I can just recall drawing this during the time when president Trump was very much against everything that's not "masculine." For people to know that you're not alone in your frustration, that you're not alone in how you feel in the midst of White supremacy where you might feel you're in a tiny boat in treacherous waters. Even without a pandemic, it's easy to feel alone, it's easy to feel disempowered if you have experienced sexism and violence in the patriarchy. You feel like there is no one else out there, nobody who would be able to hold space for me and to help me heal and that's what comics do for me; they make me feel less alone when it comes to wanting to critique institutions I belong to or to feel seen in terms of shaping an identity. So, this was a really special book because I remember seeing the list, the roster of the artists who were going to contribute to *Drawing Power*, and so many happen to be just wonderful people I have met through the zine community in the Bay area, folks who felt compelled to be a part of this book and never would I have imagined that we all would be in this huge collection of comics. I tend to hold myself short. I have a hard time celebrating things that happen in my life, but it really draws attention not only to a number of women and women-identifying people who have been hurt by White supremacy and patriarchy, but to the fact that this is not an issue that is specific to the American identity, but it spreads across cultures, across spaces that

12 *See*, in this regard, the grassroots organization AFROOS's Facebook profile and Carlos Lara's article, "El Salvador Project Illustrates the 'Invisible' African Roots of Common Latin American Words" (4 Feb. 2021, trans. Anthony Sutterman).

13 *Drawing Power: Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival. A Comics Anthology*. Ed. Diane Noomin. Introd. Roxane Gay. New York: Abrams Comicarts, 2019. Breena Nuñez contributed the graphic short story "Fuera" (114-16).

are even designed to make us feel safe; even in our own ethnic anchor we still experience machismo, sexism, violence in all directions, within White supremacy. We have to remember that femicide and sexism are also rooted in colonization and books like this show people: this is the result of what colonization does. It continues to harm people; this is something that has not stopped manifesting since the late 1800s. I'm speaking within the context of the United States and I guess in other parts of Latin America as well. Colonization has not stopped working; it's like a functioning thing that happens in the ways we talk to each other, in the ways we build relationships with each other, break each other; it still manifests within our legal systems, our governances, etc. And this is how it continues to harm us, and a book like this is just important to exist as well as other books that center women and trans-women when we produce justice. It talks about how, yes, there is still harm that comes from colonization, but we are still here; we are alive to tell these stories; we're here to grow as a resistant community.

Marcelo D'Salete:

I started producing comics and publishing in the early 2000s. That environment was very different from the context of creating and publishing comics today. In the early 2000s, with the advent of the internet, I was part of a collective of people who produced the comic magazine *Front*, using email groups.

This was a very interesting time of debate among the authors, arguing about which stories should be published in the magazine. It was the first contact with previous generations of comic artists. Well, I still publish mainly in print. But you can't deny the enormous reach of the internet today, and the importance of the publication of comics in social networks.

I still hope to produce something more specific for this universe. On the other hand, I find it incredible to see my works being distributed in public schools in a good part of Brazil, and even in quilombos. In addition, images of my graphic novels *Angola Janga* and *Cumbe* were also part of institutional videos dealing precisely with the historical struggle of the quilombolas, in defense of their right to land and to remain in their territories, with dignity.

I think that collaboration in the artistic world is something very interesting, very opportune, for you to make contacts, to meet other people, to strengthen this idea of group, of collective, which is something so difficult nowadays. So, I have already made some collaborations with Kiko Dinucci, with Alan da Rosa, with Ed Gomes, with Bruno Azevedo and, more recently, Oswaldo de Camargo—some illustrations we did together. Lately, I have been a little more busy with works that are a bit more extensive and demand a lot of time, so there were fewer opportunities for collaborations. But collective and collaborative work is

very important for the engagement of artists, for debate, for artistic and aesthetic discussion, for the formation of new artists. My initial training was based on artists' collectives, involving illustrators and comics artists as well.

It was interesting to observe that during the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, a lot of new authors emerged or became more visible, with very relevant works that help us to reflect about the current Brazil, our society. One work that started as a project specifically for the internet and that has many followers and a very good quality, is certainly comics artist Leandro Assis's and cyberactivist Triscila Oliveira's Instagram series "Confinada" ("Confined").**14** It started during the time of the pandemic, a very interesting work in terms of a social and historical record of this period, as well as in terms of questioning the social structures we are living in. Several others have emerged as well. The internet has become a great stage for manifestation, from all possible sides, and of course it is very interesting to have works like this one by Leandro and Triscila, because we also know that, more and more, the digital media are not only liberation, but we see the actions of big companies and conservative groups occupying this space, in fact, for the coercion of fake news, of non-information, of lies, in order to disturb, to create a kind of confusion between concepts and to favor this politically heated discussion that ends up appearing on the internet. So, producing material that also shows you in a different position from the conservative one is essential. Sometimes I participate in some specific actions when I am invited—campaigns, things like that. One happened last year—a campaign about quilombolas, the defense of land. They used my work for the illustration of their campaign. Recently, there is an initiative involving graphic artists doing serigraphs and other things, to help families in vulnerable situations. I contributed an image for sale, funds that are destined for specific families in difficult situations.

André Diniz:

I had experiences with digitally published comics in two instances: between 2000 and 2006, when I had a website—*Nona Arte*—where I made my comics available in PDF format for free download and which became well known at the time; and between 2013 and 2014, when I published short stories on a website that I have also deactivated now—*Muzinga*—, aiming more at tablet and smartphone readers. What caught my attention in these two periods was that the number of readers I reached was much higher than with print publications, but the titles did not gain reviews, critiques, or award nominations, and were more quickly forgotten. Print and digital publications are two very interesting and, in some way, complementary paths. I believe that, besides the more ephemeral side of digital content, paper has this particular "glamour," not least in the practice of archiving. I find it curious that, when an article about my

14 The series "Confinada" ran from 11 April 2020 – 1 April 2021; the 70 episodes were published on Leandro Assis's and Triscila Oliveira's Instragram and Twitter accounts. The series is related to its (ongoing) predecessor "Os Santos: Uma tira de ~~humor~~ ódio" ("The Saints: A ~~Humorous~~ Hateful Comic Strip"; strikethrough in original, since 5 December 2019). Both series feature related protagonists and problematize the specific situation of the (mostly female) domestic workers in Brazil, addressing and denouncing phenomena of social segregation as well as sexualized and racialized violence.

work is published in a newspaper or magazine, people come to congratulate me, they think it is fantastic, but the same does not happen with an article published on the web, even if the number of readers is ten times higher. In this case, paper is even more ephemeral than digital, because the newspaper is thrown away the next day and the digital story will probably be available for years.

But I believe that this is not the only difference. I notice that at major comic book conventions (note that CCXP in São Paulo in 2019 was the most attended comic book convention in the world), the public values the experience of buying the publication directly from the author's hand, as well as being able to get an autograph, chat a little, and exchange ideas. I had the experience of sharing a table with a colleague, each of us with our titles for sale. The two of us sold more or less equal quantities of our works. But when one of us went out for a meal or a walk, our titles stopped being sold, and only the works of the table partner who remained at the table were still being bought. So, it also gives the impression that the ease and "coldness" with which a book reaches the reader via Amazon or in digital version via social networks contrasts with the experience of adding a work to the bookshelf bought directly from the author, or even, in the case of fanzines, produced and sold by him or her directly. I therefore believe that, in the same way that an anti-system manifestation does not go well with large TV networks, an independent work, printed with few resources and passed from hand to hand, has more spirit of resistance than a link on Facebook.

Reviews

Kerry Driscoll, *Mark Twain among the Indians and Other Indigenous Peoples* (Oakland: U of California P, 2019), 464 pp.

Kerry Driscoll's *Mark Twain among the Indians and Other Indigenous Peoples* sets out to address a major gap in the extensive research on Mark Twain and his oeuvre: the writer's relationship to and views of Indigenous peoples. In the opening of the book, Driscoll gestures to the history of this research, arguing that it largely relies on overgeneralizations that pigeonhole Twain either as harboring racist sentiments towards Indigenous peoples all his life or paint the picture of a subtly redemptive arc in Twain's life and career which mirrors, even if not as consistently, the progression of his stances on slavery, racism towards Chinese and African Americans, or U.S. imperialism abroad (7). According to Driscoll, however, neither of these positions encapsulate Twain's stance fully, but rather mirror the unpredictability with which he seems to have almost erratically changed his views throughout his long career as a writer—changes which, conversely, make capturing his definitive position difficult. While the necessity to supplement the preceding scholarship does of course warrant further critical inquiry alone, Driscoll makes the point that the urgency also derives from how the uncertainties surrounding Twain's relationship with Indigenous peoples seems to complicate his widely popularized reputation as a "champion of the oppressed of all races" and as a national icon (4). The book draws on both points for its sense of direction and attempts to create a definitive archive of Twain's engagement with Indigenous peoples without "defending or defaming" him (13), while also trying to make sense of how this relationship connects to Twain's well-explored stance on racism and imperialism as such.

And the book does indeed live up to its self-ascribed status of a work of "literary archaeology" (7): Driscoll presents her readers with an impressive and meticulous excavation of basically anything that Twain has ever written, said (on record) or even may have read or experienced in connection to Indigenous peoples. She offers new readings of Twain's classics, such as *Tom Sawyer*, *Roughing It*, *Following the Equator*, and his unfinished "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians," and delves deeply into an impressive variety of letters, articles, and essays authored by Twain during his career—many of them little-known to a wider audience. Driscoll deftly contextualizes this material by embedding it in local events, political currents and public sentiments that marked the locales of Twain's lifelong journey across the United States and the globe. Through this, the book traces Twain's relationship with Indigenous peoples geographically and chronologically from the fireside tales of frontier battles of the Clemens family against "Indian marauders" told by his mother during his youth in Missouri (ch. 1), to his time in the American West where his pen name and public persona was born (ch. 2-3), to his final years on the Eastern Seaboard (ch. 4-6) interrupted by travels to Europe and especially Australia and New Zealand (ch. 7-8). This mapping refutes, Driscoll

argues, a simplified redemption arc in which Twain's open racism towards Indigenous peoples was sparked in the South in his youth, stoked in his time in the West, and began to fade in the East later in his life and in context of his criticism of European and U.S. colonialism abroad (9). Instead, the book documents Twain's seemingly random alternations between racist vitriol, satirical condescension, and romanticization of Native Americans throughout his life. Driscoll seems to have a hard time coming to terms with this pattern, especially Twain's steadfast justification of and subscription to the doctrine of discovery, Manifest Destiny, and settler colonialism, which is starkly contrasted by his vocal anti-imperialism abroad and his sympathetic view of Indigenous peoples in Oceania (352). It is at this intersection of Driscoll's analysis that her approach would have profited from a stronger commitment to the scholarly work in Indigenous studies and the study of U.S. imperialism on settler / Indigenous relations and discourses of U.S. expansion. Here, scholars like Jodi Byrd, Amy Kaplan, and John Carlos Rowe (among others) discuss how a seemingly disparate odd couple of criticism of colonialism abroad (including the United States' own overseas expansion) and a (at times) celebratory discourse of "domestic" colonialism, is not so much indicative of an inconsistent but ultimately anti-colonial position, but is rather a quite common trope of the nineteenth century that legitimizes and glorifies U.S. continental expansion via its rejection of overseas imperialism (Driscoll 352; see Byrd; Kaplan; Rowe; Temmen). If Twain's casual and intermittent racism towards Native Americans can be read as related to this discourse, the "mystery" of his relationship to Indigenous peoples, which Driscoll considers still unsolved at the end of the book, is revealed not to be the mystery of a lack of a coherence in Twain's position, but rather of how Twain, who is revered as ahead of his time on so many other issues, could have been simply a man of his time in his perception of Indigenous peoples (369-70). Coming to terms with this question is essential, and Driscoll's impressive historical archive compiled in this book is a definitive sourcebook that invites such further excavation.

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Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Oakland: U of California P, 2020), 144 pp.

What at first glance appears to be a short introduction to environmental justice from a distinctly American studies perspective turns out to be a more than timely meditation on the significance of environmental justice movements for the future of a planet in crisis. Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* comprehensively connects seemingly diverse environmental justice struggles (such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the responses to natural disasters in the cases of Hurricanes Katrina and Maria) and in doing so puts forward a fervent and compassionate call to imagine alternative futures outside of the neoliberal matrix of power to build a more equitable and habitable world.

Throughout the book, Sze structures her analysis of these environmental justice movements around two major areas: 1. their critical potential and 2. their creative and (re-)generative potential. Sze argues that environmental justice movements "help us understand historical and cultural forces and resistance to violence, death, and destruction of lives and bodies through movements, cultures, and stories" (4). Consequently, she compellingly shows how environmental injustice is rooted in the long histories of racism, colonialism, capitalism, and gender inequality, and further points out the intimate link between "race, indigeneity, poverty and environmental inequality" (5). Simultaneously, Sze focuses on the transformative power of the cultural imagination set in motion by these movements in creating cross-communal solidarities and imagining alternative futures that resist hegemonic narratives of neoliberal progress, privatization, and deregulation. In Sze's words, these movements then offer "a set of cautiously hopeful stories" (13) for the future, thus highlighting their capacity for generating collective planetary imaginaries centered around notions of radical hope, mutual care, and responsibility, which are necessarily opposed to the dominant narratives of neoliberalism. With this dual focus in mind, the following paragraphs will briefly discuss each of the three chapters and their respective case studies.

Chapter One, entitled "This Movement of Movements," examines the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline as "land-based violence" (26) on Native lands and illustrates how Indigenous struggles are central to discussions of climate change and environmental injustice. In her analysis of the protests at Standing Rock and the #NoDAPL movement, Sze exposes the historical and ideological roots of environmental injustice against Native populations by looking at several critical concepts of American Studies (such as the doctrine of discovery, Manifest Destiny, etc.). This part offers a particularly valuable introduction to readers unfamiliar with these concepts, and most of them reappear in a helpful glossary at the end of the book.

Aside from a site of "dispossession, production, extraction, and violence" (28), Standing Rock additionally represents a site of potentiality and possibility. According to Sze, Standing Rock "illustrates the psychic and cultural imaginary of environmental justice movements that provides a blueprint for cultural survival, resurgence, and solidarity […] between different communities of affiliation" (29). Sze succinctly shows how Standing Rock opens up the possibility to imagine alternative futures through storytelling, art, and the lived practice of the everyday, as well as through worldwide expressions of collective solidarity.

The interdependency of environmental justice struggles and the resulting necessity for cross-communal solidarities leads Sze directly into the second

chapter entitled "Environmental Justice Encounters," which examines environmental racism and water injustice in the context of Flint, Michigan, and the Central Valley of California. While these cases differ in their visibility in the media—Flint as an example of hypervisibility, the Central Valley as an example of invisibility—they are "linked by a collective resistance to neoliberalism and the politics of privatization, privation, and predation [...] embedded into systems that devalue some lives over others" (53-54), highlighting the inherent link between race, neoliberal policies, and environmental injustice.

In this chapter, Sze also stresses the function of storytelling as a profoundly political act. Often dismissed as "an emotional or unempirical, subjective (and weak) approach versus the muscular truth of data and science" (56), storytelling becomes crucial to environmental justice movements precisely because it foregrounds emotional narratives and personal experiences. According to Sze, storytelling is "central to efforts to build and expand networks of solidarity, identify and process shared trauma, forge a sense of collective identity, and work collaboratively toward political transformation" (71). At the same time, it allows for "ruptures in the technoscientific façade of normalized and slow violence" (72). Consequently, personal stories but also artistic expressions (e. g., #HipHop4Flint) can render the experience of racialized violence against silenced bodies legible while connecting them to larger struggles and allowing for the emergence of intricate solidarities. Where democratic governance fails to provide adequate relief, environmental justice movements can help advance more radical alternatives on multiple levels.

The importance of storytelling as a political act is further solidified in the last chapter entitled "Restoring Environmental Justice," which deals with the politics of natural disasters in the cases of Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, and the destruction of Indigenous villages in Kivalina, Alaska, as a result of melting sea ice and erosion. In this chapter, Sze briefly introduces the concept of *restorative environmental justice* as a sustainable approach for the future. Restorative environmental justice, according to Sze, needs to be "based on environmental justice practices, principles, and worldviews" (78) and function as "a call for solidarity focused on accountability, art, and the continued search for freedom in a body or bodies shaped by the force of racism, capitalism, and technology" (87), thus merging lived realities and cultural production in the fight against environmental injustice on a planetary scale.

The narratives and connections that Sze draws across these various environmental justice struggles are fueled by the emphatic hope that "[a]nother world *is* possible" (29; emphasis in original). *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* thus provides hopeful visions of freedom and solidarity shaped by the lived experiences of environmental injustices across diverse communities. Instead of a purely factual analysis of these movements, Sze taps into their potential to recognize the commonality of these primarily local articulations of environmental justice struggles and the possibilities that can arise from them. This view of environmental justice movements renders Sze's book especially pertinent to the current moment because, to conclude with Sze, "[o]ur triumph is survival, the choices we make and the stories we tell" (24).

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Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*
(Princeton, NJ: U of Princeton P, 2020), 272 pp.

Over the last five years, we have witnessed the political rise and establish-
ment of Donald Trump. His presidency with its nativist, incendiary, and para-
noid style of politics has been accompanied by an extremist fan club made up
of various far-right groups, like neo-Nazis, the Alt-Right, Oath Keepers, and
the Proud Boys, among many others. Admittedly, right-wing extremism is not
a new phenomenon. We have rather seen the normalization of extremist nar-
ratives and their dissemination into mainstream spaces by prominent public
figures—from Republican politicians to *Fox News* anchors. During Trump's
term, political rallies, marches, and protests organized by far-right groups mul-
tiplied across the country and White supremacist propaganda peaked at an all-
time high, online and offline (see SPLC). The surge of far-right hate crimes
and terrorist violence—culminating in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on
January 6, 2021—has led to a national reckoning of the gravity and urgency of
the threat of domestic extremism. Cynthia Miller-Idriss's *Hate in the Homeland*
emerges out of this agitated context. The book offers an illuminating study of
current forms of far-right radicalization in the United States that is both highly
stimulating and highly disquieting. The author aims to uncover "the physical
and virtual scenes, the imagined territories and sacred geographies, and the
cultural spaces where hate is cultivated" (3), and sheds light on how these new
spaces of far-right radicalization help the movement thrive financially, politi-
cally, and culturally. It is also a methodologically ambitious study that offers an
inspiring take on the research on the far right itself, broadening the focus from
why and *how* radicalization and growth happen to *where* and *when* they happen.
Hate in the Homeland is an important read for scholars of cultural studies who
are interested in the intersections of space and identity, belonging and other-
ing, popular culture and subcultures, as well as the role of the "everyday" and
emotions in political engagement, and conspiracy theories and "retrotopian"
fantasies (Bauman) as genres.

The book's main objective is to uncover the "new gateways" (3) through which
the far right propagates its ideologies, cultivates its recruits, and radicalizes the
youth. We learn that the contemporary U.S. far right is characterized by a mul-
titude of "entry points, fragmented scenes, and newer groups and associations"
(25), many of which intentionally choose spaces not previously associated with
right-wing and White supremacist groups. This elusiveness is what drives the
growth of the far right in the United States and beyond. *Hate in the Homeland*
dives into those cultural spaces to understand the ways individuals, and in par-
ticular the youth, are mobilized through ordinary and flexible participation in
mainstream physical and virtual spaces weaponized by the far right. Miller-
Idriss's book expands prior work on the U.S. far right and its relation to space
(see Flint; Futrell and Simi) by locating modern movements within a profound-
ly altered ecosystem of radicalization—one that is fragmented, dynamic, and
broadening. The author argues that these new mainstream spaces are critical not
only to understand how the contemporary far right functions and survives but
also to find effective ways to counter its rise.

Hate in the Homeland is organized in two sections. The first part (introduc-
tion, ch. 1 and 2) provides readers with foundational knowledge on the mod-
ern U.S. far right, its interrelation with space, and its mainstreaming strate-
gies. Miller-Idriss starts out by defining what the "far right" is and examines
its distinct practices, ideals, and fantasies. She writes that the term refers to a

broad ideological and political spectrum that includes "beliefs that are anti-democratic, antiegalitarian, white supremacist, and embedded in solutions like authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing or ethnic migration, and the establishment of separate ethno-states" (18). Miller-Idriss then assesses the role of real and imagined geographies in far-right ideologies and radicalization processes. In doing so, she investigates issues of identity, entitlement, belonging and exclusion, the sensual and affective qualities of space, ecofascist attitudes, and fantasies of sacred national geographies. This part places emphasis on the ways space and place are vital to the far right's subsistence and normalization. Thus, we are also presented with a comprehensive account on the mechanisms that bring extremist rhetoric, conspiracy theories, aesthetics, and communication styles into mainstream spheres—thereby reaching potential recruits far beyond the traditional domains of the far right.

The second part turns to four cultural spaces in which the transnational far right is currently thriving. Firstly (ch. 3), Miller-Idriss examines the tentacular far-right markets for food and fashion—arenas that are often disregarded in the study of far-right and White supremacist movements. Through precise analyses of contemporary phenomena—from vegan far-right cooking shows on *You-Tube*, extreme prepper and survivalist food provisions, to expensive "nationalist streetwear" (79)—she investigates the ways right-wing and so-called "patriotic" commercial markets not only finance the far right but also gradually socialize individuals to extremist ideals and values, providing them a sense of purpose and belonging.

The following analysis (ch. 4) focuses on the gym and combat-sports culture. In particular, the chapter delves into Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and fight clubs as key physical places of radicalization that are aligned with far right ideals about masculinity, the fit body, apocalyptic struggle, and extreme violence. Miller-Idriss considers the MMA scene as an ideal "incubator" for far-right groups because it recruits young people from "adjacent subcultures" (100), introduces them to fundamental right-wing beliefs and messages, and physically trains them to supposedly "defend the nation and white European civilization" (100). Altogether, the instrumentalization of the combat-sport scene by the far right reflects an unnerving trend: "extremists are increasingly moving out of the world of fantasy and utopian thinking and into the world of direct action and violent engagement" (100).

Miller-Idriss then (ch. 5) turns to the far right's physical and ideological assaults on mainstream intellectual spaces, such as universities, bookstores, and historical archives, and on its own efforts towards the cultivation of its (future) intellectual leadership. According to her, the far right targets campuses for two reasons: 1) their attacks represent a broader assault on knowledge and expertise in a space considered dominated by the left; 2) the campuses are tangible spaces for recruitment and for testing the limits of free speech, disseminating propaganda, and polarizing communities. This chapter is especially powerful because it lays bare the vulnerabilities that universities face against far-right forces—including physical assaults and psychological harassment of scholars and students as well as material damages. It also exposes the ways far-right leaders appropriate academic scholarship for their own political ends, spinning, for instance, studies on race, immigration, and demographics to legitimize their ideologies and actions.

Finally (ch. 6), Miller-Idriss scrutinizes online spaces and, in particular, social media. She addresses various issues, like questions of banning and de-platforming, the rise of alternative platforms and communication channels, the

phenomena of "echo-chambers" and "algorithmic radicalization" (147), and the use and circulation of an online aesthetic. Some readers might be perplexed that the author chose to close her book about new spaces of far-right radicalization with online spaces, as extensive scholarship on the subject indeed already exists (a fact that she acknowledges herself [138]). The real strength of this analysis, however, rests on the claim that radicalization cannot solely happen in online spaces, but that there is, in fact, a complex and strategic interplay of online and offline activities that "enables the far right to maximize the circulation, communication, and effectiveness" of its ideologies (138).

Chapters 3-6 each close with concrete solutions and examples of policies and programs effectively taken in other countries to prevent far-right radicalization and the movement's global rise (most often, examples are taken from the German context). Those include pragmatic and comprehensive public education efforts concerned with training communities—and in particular children and their parents—to recognize extremist discourse in mainstream arenas. The book concludes with the real possibilities of preventive educational work, the need for transnational collaborations and policy solutions, and reflects on some lessons from Europe to situate the fight against the far right within a broader democratic and civil-society building project—ultimately, for the author, "we all have a role to play" (176).

Overall, *Hate in the Homeland* is a deep dive into the new spaces, fringe and mainstream, that generate and sustain far-right ideologies and engagements. Miller-Idriss's analyses of right-wing cultural spaces and texts are incisive and informative, even though—at times—they contain a few overgeneralizations. A deeper theoretical engagement with the concepts of "space" and "place," for instance, would have been greatly beneficial to the discussion. The book's structure and arguments are convincing and well-organized despite some minor repetitions throughout the chapters. It provides readers, in an almost didactic manner, with the tools to understand and combat the complex dynamics and dangers of the contemporary U.S. far right. It is an important book for anyone trying to piece together what has been happening for the past few years and what can be done about it, because the far right is *trending,* and it sure shows no sign of withering away.

<div align="right">Axelle Germanaz (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)</div>

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Susanne Rohr, *Von Grauen und Glamour: Repräsentationen des Holocaust in den USA und Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2021), 386 pp.

The title *Von Grauen und Glamour* recalls the by now widely known quip "There's no business like Shoah-Business." And indeed, this monograph addresses processes of commercialization, medialization, and Americanization with regard to Holocaust representations. Susanne Rohr sets out to analyze how second- and third-generation writers (and artists) in Germany and the United States depict the Shoah.

In order to analyze Holocaust representations as expressions of national and transnational collective memory Rohr calls first on the theories—and main theorists—of memory studies such as Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, before moving on to discuss the problem of grouping and categorizing writers into "generations." She then sketches a history of Shoah representations in Germany, the United States, and to a lesser degree in Israel, basing her arguments on (among others) Hilene Flanzbaum's *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (1999). It is helpful here that Rohr reminds her readers of the history of crucial terminology: the etymology of the term "Holocaust," for instance, or the origin of notions like "rupture of civilization" or "negative symbiosis." She also recalls historic markers, such as 1952, when the *Diary of Anne Frank* was published; 1961, the year of the trial of Adolf Eichmann; the Six-Day War of 1967 (erroneously dated 1969 on page 37); 1978 when the television series *Holocaust* aired; and the German historians' dispute of 1985. Equally important are the landmark studies she discusses, such as *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (1980) or Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999). All these references and contexts already demonstrate the scope of her research. The book analyzes novels and memoirs, including graphic novels, but gives equal space to film and, time and again, discusses examples from the fine arts. Within this broad range, there is a discernible emphasis on second- and third-generation cultural production, foregrounding the genre of comedies and a comparative approach, with both American and German texts, as well as frequent examples from other cultural contexts. Given the breadth of Rohr's project, her approach is, however, somewhat eclectic, proceeding more along associative lines than a systematic and comprehensive line of exploration.

One special area of interest is film, and Rohr identifies Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994), and Roberto Benigni's *La Vita è Bella* (1997) as paradigmatic examples of the Holocaust documentary, epic, and comedy respectively. At first mainly assuming the form of documentaries concerned with questions of authenticity, reliability, and the (un)representability of the Holocaust, representations of the Holocaust, she illustrates, became more frequent and more Americanized in time, resulting in a certain "Holocaust fatigue" (Gewen qtd. in Rohr 53) by the turn of the century. One of Rohr's main tenets, and one she frequently returns to, is that the 1990s marked a shift in paradigm from documentary to comedy as the principal mode of Shoah representation. The many Holocaust comedies from the late 1990s onward that enjoy breaking taboos are more than just a provocation in the face of a tradition that had established authenticity as the sanctified norm for writing on the Holocaust, she argues. The comedies that succeed do so not by lessening the suffering of the victims but by engaging with, questioning, and complicating the rhetoric of established Holocaust representation, including, for example, notions of unrepresentability. A case in point—which Rohr discusses in depth—is *Hotel Auschwitz* (2019). The film not only stages the speechlessness and helplessness

that confronts people when facing the Holocaust but also illustrates the highly problematic strategies of representation that have developed as a result of it.

Another manifest strength of Rohr's study is her detailed analysis of literary texts. Major attention is given to Melvin Jules Bukiet, *After* (1996), Tova Reich, *My Holocaust* (2007), Shalom Auslander, *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012), Thomas Lehr, *Frühling* (2001), Kevin Vennemann, *Nahe Jedenew* (2005), and Katja Petrows-kaja, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014). Rohr's discussions offer ingenious insights and succeed as interpretations informed by theory without losing sight of the texts themselves. In *Vielleicht Esther*, Rohr detects a "trust in the power of words" (262). This focus on language exemplifies her main argument, which proposes that the central question has changed from *how* to *why* the Shoah is represent-ed, with the result that second and third generation writers and artists no lon-ger try to tackle questions of authenticity or appropriateness of representation but rather reflect on the specific language and (Americanized, transnational) iconography of previous Shoah representations and their respective purposes.

The final section of Susanne Rohr's book reveals another interest of hers, namely the transnational aspect of contemporary writing on the Holocaust. Nora Krug's graphic novel *Belonging* (2018) and Angelika Bammer's life narra-tive *Born After* (2019) are interesting case studies, since both authors are Ameri-cans with German roots. The different covers of the American and German ver-sions in Krug's case suggest different readings as Rohr convincingly illustrates. While the American version offers critical distance to the events of the past, the German version seems more in line with the so-called "Opfernarrativ," i. e. non-Jewish Germans considering themselves the primary victims of the Nazi period. Here Rohr's thesis that the "Opfernarrativ setzt sich nach 2000 durch" (313)—"the victim narrative prevails after 2000"—appears rather misleading. One could indeed argue, if one were to write a history of German representa-tions since the 1950s, that this has been the prevailing attitude all along.

The book concludes with the insight that Germans are still seeking some kind of forgiveness, maybe even redemption—a longing which even Rohr's crit-ical study cannot fully escape on its final pages. A comprehensive filmography and bibliography at the end of her book provide helpful tools for any further research in the field. These reviewers only miss Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) on the reading list in which arguably the short story "Eli, the Fanatic" is one of the first to raise the topic in American literature. It would then, in the 1960s, become, as Rohr rightfully observes, a major subject. Also missing is *We Remember with Reverence and Love* (2009) by the renowned American historian Hasia Diner, in which she debunks the myth that American Jews kept quiet about the Holocaust until the 1960s, a claim reiterated here. Admittedly, these are minor complaints in a well-researched and equally well-written book.

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