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## **She Speaks Her Truth: Black Female Self-Empowerment in African-American Centric Texts**

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She Speaks Her Truth: Black Female Self-Empowerment in African-American Centric Texts

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Final Master's Portfolio

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Bowling Green State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Field of English  
with a Specialization in Literary & Textual Studies

April 2022

Dr. Jolie A. Sheffer, First Reader

Dr. Sue Carter-Wood, Second Reader

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### Synthesis of the MA Portfolio

The scope of my MA Portfolio all began with reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* as an undergraduate during the last semester of my senior year. I read Morrison's novel with Julie Haught, one of the instructors here at Bowling Green State University. I remember reading the novel in two sittings, engrossed in Morrison's plot and of her literary talent. I wrote one of my papers in Professor Haught's class about *Sula* and how the protagonist Sula Peace defined her own version of Black femininity in the early 20th century. I thought after doing my BA Thesis (which challenged me as a writer and researcher), I thought I had written my best work. I did not realize that *Sula* would be a text I would return to again as a graduate student, especially in my MA Portfolio. However, I knew then the novel would impact me for a long time, as *Sula* taught me a lot about Black feminism and literary studies.

I came into the Literary and Textual Studies program in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also entered knowing I had many different research interests. One research interest that has stuck by me since entering the program is that of texts written by Black women engaging with themes of Black feminism. Within the MA Portfolio, the main research questions I had throughout my time reading and writing was how do Black women in either novels, plays, or films interact within the Black community, outside of the white gaze? These essays in this dossier focus on outspoken Black women who champion for not just themselves when others try to stifle their spirits, but for the entirety of their communities. I am especially interested in how society helps shape these women and what limits or frees them in the context of their stories. A theme of autonomy appears within all four sections of my MA Portfolio, and for each of the Black female protagonists I write upon, they each have methods to exerting power they reclaim

from white hegemony and Black patriarchy. Black female empowerment through these methods of inquiry allowed me to dig deep into Black feminism and thought thoroughly.

I both reread and did a revamped research paper on *Sula* in my ENG 6010 Introduction to Graduate Studies course with Dr. Kimberly Coates. This time around, I built upon my research as an undergraduate to discuss the novel within early Black feminist activism of the 1970s and the reasons as to why Black feminism came to fruition after the Civil Rights Movement. I read upon the works of Michele Wallace's text *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* as part of my research for understanding *Sula* in this different lens of research inquiry. I shifted from a general Black feminist understanding of *Sula* to a Black feminist understanding in relation to the early inklings of Black feminist coalition building after the Civil Rights Movement.

I knew from the beginning of entering the MA Literary and Textual Studies program that one of my research interests included intersectional feminism; in particular, Black feminism. Before entering the program, I read works written by Black women such as Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lynn Nottage's play *Sweat*, and Ava DuVernay's screenplay for the film *Middle of Nowhere* (Ava DuVernay, 2012). During the Spring 2021 semester, I took a course led by Dr. Jolie Sheffer: ENG 6750 Black Protest and Black Joy. This class focused solely on Black centric texts which gave a variety of Black voices to their readers about their own perspective of living while Black and in the United States. For the third time, I read *Sula* and I felt like this was an indication that if I were to pursue the MA Portfolio, I had to include the novel due to my history of reading and researching extensively upon this influential work. Black texts written primarily by Black women about Black women is one subject matter that I enjoy

reading and researching upon, and lo and behold, my MA Portfolio began to narrow itself down considerably.

As a white person (a non-marginalized identity I have), I write in the context that I am amplifying Black women's voices and sharing what I think about the texts I encountered to non-Black folks. This MA Portfolio begins to discuss just some ways in which Black heroines navigate their worlds and how who they are impacts themselves and those around them. My research begins to start a conversation about these texts. I certainly do not insinuate that what I discuss in my MA Portfolio is a comprehensive overview of Black women centric texts. By focusing on just one of the many angles I took in each chapter of my MA Portfolio, I lead my readers to a starting point in each text I discuss at length. These chapters serve as an introduction and a snapshot of a much larger picture, an image of Black feminism and Black literary studies.

The overarching themes within my MA Portfolio are including, but not strictly limited to, Black female self-empowerment. Each main protagonist in every chapter lives their fullest potential despite barriers that attempt to stifle their voices and spirits. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, I use Black female self-empowerment in relation to travel and bodily autonomy as I am interested in Morrison's female characters experience travel in relation to their identities. In Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet*, self-empowerment through the main female protagonist Billie is echoed in audio recordings of Black nationalists, as she finds strength in her Blackness. In Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*, Camae's differing methods for the Civil Rights Movement strengthen her love and self-preservation of the Black community. Lastly, George C. Wolfe's film adaptation *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* shows Ma Rainey fully confident in herself when face to face with white men. These outspoken and bold women challenge issues within their own Black communities and of white hegemonic power. These women serve as a narrative for a need of inclusivity and a

more nuanced way of thinking about livelihoods in their day-to-day lives. From the town of Medallion, to the intersections of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X Boulevards in Harlem, to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, and to the Paramount recording studio in Chicago, a need for representing confident Black femininity is a requirement for each of the principal Black female protagonists.

Another overarching theme of my MA Portfolio that embodies this project is conversation and language. All of the principal Black female characters in their respective texts use conversation and language to assert their identities and to engage with Black feminist thought with other Black folks in their communities. Words have power and meaning, and in close reading each text, play, and film, I connect their spoken words to thoughts echoed by other Black voices or voices that write on Black literary subject matter. During my time in the Literary and Textual Studies program, I took a few non-program specific courses that helped me in the process of writing the Portfolio. Two classes were linguistics courses, LING 6150 Introduction to Linguistics and LING 5180 Applied Phonology with Dr. Sheri-Wells Jensen. The other course I took was ENG 6210 Writing and Rhetoric Studies as a Discipline with Dr. Sue Carter-Wood. My linguistics courses provided me additional context in which language and spoken word provides a variety of meanings in different contexts. By taking the introductory Writing and Rhetoric course, I appreciated even more how writers write given the circumstances in which they live in and how a writer's psyche determines the content that they share to the world.

In taking these courses before writing the MA Portfolio, this helped with the overarching theme of conversation and language. In each of the texts I discuss, the authors situate the female protagonists to speak with other characters that generally share different values. This mode of engagement helps aid in the story progression of each text and allows for me to pick up on these

conversations and share my insights on them. However, this overarching theme of communication and language happens in two different social spheres: one sphere being communication within a character's given Black community and the other being communication between Black and white communities. Language use in each text is important in telling these stories featuring Black women as the principal character, whether used in spoken word or by metaphors. In the chapters I discuss Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* and George C. Wolfe's 2020 film adaptation of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, I analyze their usage of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English)/Black English. These texts reveal how this dialect of American English is used to articulate characters' specific livelihoods within the Black community, how their ideas about Black personhood cannot be extracted by their usage of AAVE/Black English. Including these two works with this English dialect in mind cannot be dissected from the issues these works raise and try to contextualize. Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Harlem Duet* have characters that use AAVE/Black English in their spoken words too, but I consider that there is less emphasis on the dialect and more about discourse concerning Black female autonomy and empowerment.

I begin the MA Portfolio with Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* as my first chapter. As I mentioned previously, this text threaded its way from its origins in my last semester of my senior year in my undergraduate studies all the way up to here and now. *Sula* explores the coming of age of two Black girls who mature into young women: Sula Peace and Nel Wright. Each woman grew up in different home environments, and part of their identities I argue stem from the travels that they participate in. The way in which Morrison uses travel in her novel indicates the type of woman Sula and Nel will become. Travel determines the type of purpose that each woman will have or not have in their community of the Bottom. I include Sula's grandmother Eva Peace as to show that her travels stemmed from surviving as a single mother and to contrast Eva with Sula's



declared independence from traditional Black motherhood and womanhood. For Nel, her purpose of travel was to mourn for her great-great grandmother and to not be the kind of woman her mother Helene feared: a “loose” and “provocative” woman. Unlike Eva and Nel, Sula travels for self-fulfillment, uncommon for Black women in the early 20th century in the United States. This causes tensions and ultimatums. Overall, Morrison’s objective feelings towards the three women and their purpose of travel influences the type of women they become.

I use Maggie Galehouse’s article “‘New World Woman’: Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” as to contextualize Sula as a woman who lives outside of the expectations of Black women in her community. A couple of other sources in aiding the theme of travel and position in place was Ceron L. Bryant’s article “Seeking Peace: The Application of Third Space Theory in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” and a personal essay written by Georgina Lawton titled “Why Black Solo Female Travel is a Radical Act.” Just because I knew *Sula* the most coming into writing the MA Portfolio did not mean this would be an easier essay for me to revise and expand my ideas about the novel. I learned quickly that each essay revision could be drastically different from the first, and that is expected.

My second chapter is on the stage play *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears. A prequel adaptation to William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *Harlem Duet* is about a Black woman, Billie who is in the process of grief over losing her husband Othello (named after Shakespeare’s work) to a white woman named Mona (named after Shakespeare’s Desdemona). Tensions explode between the fractured couple over Othello’s eager acceptance to whitewash himself, and Billie reminding him of his Black culture and how he should be proud of it. I read this for Dr. Stephannie Gearhart’s ENG 6800 course titled Shakespeare and Adaptation and lead class discussion about the play. In this chapter of my MA Portfolio, I make the argument that the play’s usage of audio

voice clips of Black prominent activists and speakers highlight the stream of consciousnesses of both Billie and Othello. Sears' incorporation of many different Black speakers serves as what goes on in Billie and Othello's minds, a theatrical technique I had not encountered until this semester. In constructing this chapter, I wanted to analyze three scenes that I felt embodied the thesis of this chapter in the most effective manner. I found Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's article "Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*" useful because in this piece, the audio clips were talked about in relation to Billie and Othello. It is in this final draft that I hope to convey an argument that has not made it to critical, scholarly discussion (of my knowledge) as I did with Toni Morrison's usage of travel. *Harlem Duet* challenged me to focus more on the text at hand so I could make this essay a literary studies conversation and not a research paper as my mind typically reverts to when I do not have a clarified thesis.

In the third chapter of my MA Portfolio, I turn to discuss Katori Hall's play *The Mountaintop*, a text I read for Dr. Sheffer's class I mentioned previously. The play chronicles a fictionalized account of the last night of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life before his assassination. In the play, he is referred to as "King." He meets a young Black housekeeper named Camae who talks with him about the fate of the Civil Rights Movement, and what could change to make the United States a more equitable place. Camae reveals herself to be an angel appointed by God to help King move to the afterlife. King does not want to die so soon, as he has better plans to champion Black rights. Camae tells him that his legacy will go beyond his time and that he has nothing to worry about. I write that in *The Mountaintop*, activism works when all voices of marginalized folks are heard, not just the more privileged groups of people within said marginalized groups. Camae is a woman who uses AAVE/Black English in her dialogue,

typically not seen as “respectable” as King, who code-switches to be taken seriously against an already polarized country. Camae serves as a reminder for King to listen more to the Black voices that were historically overlooked (i.e. Black women, working-class Black folks, etc.).

Writing about *The Mountaintop* made me focus more on the way language, especially Black English, is understood in Black communities. In preparing to write this chapter for my MA Portfolio, I read April Baker-Bell’s text *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* as a main source to contextualize the play’s understanding of the Black English dialect. Baker-Bell’s work focuses on Black English and its usage in a predominantly Black high school in Detroit, Michigan, but Baker-Bell incorporates the history, semiotics, and understandings of the dialect within her research. I cited her explanations about why Black English is seen as inferior to both Black and white societies, and how anti-Blackness within Black communities harms all Black folks within the contents of *The Mountaintop*. This text proved so monumental to my research for this chapter, and Baker-Bell made her ideas clear and understood. Learning more about Black English in a scholarly setting gave me the tools necessary to write parts of the play.

Last, but not least, is George C. Wolfe’s 2020 film adaptation of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. The screen adaptation is based upon August Wilson’s stage play of the same name. In the film, Ma Rainey (Viola Davis) is a blues sensation from the American South who travels with her band to Chicago to record her music in a small, run down, sweltering Paramount recording booth in 1927. She fights tooth and nail with the racist music producers who attempt to manipulate her and the band to play her songs the way they want to to make more money. Rainey knows her worth, and by putting her foot down and not letting anyone try to take away her creative power and Blackness of her music, she eventually gets what she wants at the end of

the film. I argue that *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* attests to the powerhouse and ultimate expression of Black self-love within Rainey through her physical appearance, sexual orientation as a Black lesbian, and her pro-Black mentality.

Writing this last chapter for my MA Portfolio got me to remember how I first encountered jazz music when I was in middle school, and I hyper fixated on the American 1920s and flappers. While I do not make the assumption that Rainey embodies the spirit of a flapper, she definitely does with her beautiful clothing, progressive social values, and of making the world a more diverse place to live. A little bit of nostalgia inspired me to take on writing the film adaptation, but mainly I had this film on my Netflix watchlist and I found the film perfect for the type of conversations I kept writing about in my MA Portfolio. In just some of my sources I used in writing this chapter, I used Allison K. Hammer's "'Just Like a Natural Man': The B.D. Styles of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith" in regards to Black lesbian identity in relation to the blues and I take Audre Lorde's essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" to show how despite the anger Rainey has about a racist society that perpetrates anti-Blackness, she chooses to take back the power that white hegemony stole from her to be the proud Black woman she is.

Working with these texts is a privilege that I took the utmost care and precision with. Intersectional feminism (more specifically, Black feminist literary conversations) within literary studies is a scope I am glad to have done my MA Portfolio on. It is my hope that one day, people will read my works and interact with my essays for their own essays, to continue the conversation forward for years to come. Most importantly, my ultimate goal in writing upon these texts is to demonstrate a need to listen and uplift voices that historically have not been at the center of dominant discourse. Writing for me is a form of activism. Educating others about

pressing matters concerning Black women through writing and talking to society at large is how we build a better and more equitable society. A more safe and inclusive world.

What next after graduation? I plan to take a break from my Master's before going on for a PhD. I realize that the job market for professorships shrink more each year, and getting accepted to a university to teach is a game of probability along with the years of experience one has. I want to work in higher education, but more on the administrative side until I am ready (mentally and financially) to take on doctoral studies. While I may feel dejected if I do not become a professor one day, I still want to earn a doctorate and to say I made it all the way. My high school self was determined to earn a Master's degree, but my mother reminded me back then that I needed to finish my Bachelor's first! Now that I am very nearly set out to graduate, I present to you my MA Portfolio.

### Travel as a Mode of Identity in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* follows Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two Black girls who come of age in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. The novel's Black feminist themes have been analyzed and discussed extensively among scholars, critics, and everyday readers alike. Morrison's storytelling and a refusal to explicitly state her opinions on the actions of the characters within *Sula* make for engaging interpretations of the novel. With such a precise and detailed attention to the characters' psyches, Morrison creates characters that rationalize their actions depending on their status within their community. Characters within the novel are interested in other people and their livelihoods, and often compare themselves to each other to determine if their lives are deemed well-spent and if they adhere to expectations of people within their communities. More specifically, characters travel within *Sula* for various reasons, from the practical to the personal. How does travel function within the world of Morrison's characters?

While much has been said about the novel in regards to Black feminism and Black travel, *Sula* can be read with these two subjects in an intersectional, intertextual manner. Women and travel in Morrison's novel is intriguing because each of the main protagonists do so for vastly different reasons. In the early 20th century where most Black women could not freely move around geographical areas, Morrison's Black female characters do. Whether their travels were for caring for others or by self-interest, travel in Morrison's novel showcases just how much autonomy was in these travels that the characters underwent. By examining the characters Eva Peace, Nel Wright, and Sula Peace, I argue that travel allows each woman to better understand what role she embodies within her community. In the world of *Sula*, women are either part of the gender hegemony where women do not travel outside of their desires, or they are a social outsider because their refusal to not be associated with domesticity makes them alienated from

their community. Morrison writes each woman with particularity; these differences allow for the potential reasons as to why travel happens in context to Black female autonomy.

Eva Peace is the matriarch of the Peace family in Medallion, or as the Black residents call their part of town, “The Bottom.” Running a boarding house for people who need a place to stay on their travels, Eva knows first-hand the travel she had to do in order to provide for herself and her three small children. Eva’s only travels for familial survival, and it is not her own autonomous decision. Her husband BoyBoy left their small children. Eva’s purpose then was to keep her little family thriving as best as she could with a few helpful Black families she knew. Even so, in order for her to financially provide for herself and her children, she had to leave The Bottom until she found financial safety. Leaving her small children under the care of Mrs. Suggs, Eva told her that she would return one day later, but did not. Morrison writes that “eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg” (34). There is not any narration as to what happens between Eva dropping the children to Mrs. Suggs and when she returns home, but the absence of her leg implies that she amputated it for money. Her loss of her leg demonstrates just how willing she was to do anything in order to provide for her children, as this particular travel also comes from the traditional gender role of a mother doing everything within her power to provide for her family without complaint.

Ceron L. Bryant argues that Eva’s amputation “has forced the boundaries of motherhood and Black womanhood to give way to more complex, convoluted realities . . . As a way of rejecting the patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood, [Eva] has shown a willingness to take risks” (254). Eva’s travel for necessity is due to her status as a single Black mother who needed income and did anything she could in order to provide for herself and her small children. In losing a part of herself physically, she returns home in order to start a stable future, making

her whole again in a new context. Without BoyBoy to financially support them all, Eva made her forced departure from the Bottom. Eva's lack of financial support forced her to travel to an undisclosed place in order to gain an income. The expression that parents give to their children about doing what they can for them (the phrase being "to give an arm and a leg"), literally happened in Eva's case. As a single mother with no access to childcare, there was not an option for her to be a working single mother. There were two choices, and Eva had to shed her motherly identity for a year and a half in order for some financial stability. Morrison depicts Eva's fierce devotion to her family when Hannah (Eva's daughter and Sula's mother) asks her if Eva loved her and her siblings when they were all children. Shocked that Hannah could ask such a question, Eva defends her version of motherhood. In their argument, Eva exclaims "[a]in't that [my beets] count? You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?" (Morrison 69). Now that Hannah is an adult and a mother of her own, Eva explains to her about the love language she has regarding her early motherhood. Eva's love was through acts of domestic service to her and her children, and with so little to their name before Eva's amputation, Eva's seemingly stoic and loveless demeanor is talked about between her and Hannah. Her travel did not exist for self-pleasure as Morrison uses Eva's travel narrative as one for necessity and survival of herself and her children.

The root of Eva's disdain of travel for purposes outside of familial survival stems from her estranged husband, BoyBoy. He arrives at Eva's new house after Plum (BoyBoy and Eva's son) turns three years old. When BoyBoy leaves Eva and heads to his mistress, he tells her something in which she reacts with "[a] high-pitched big-city laugh that reminded Eva of Chicago. It hit her like a sledgehammer, and it was then she knew what to feel. A liquid trail of



hate flooded her chest” (36). Here, the reader understands that Eva finds people who travel or even live in big cities as arrogant. Eva most certainly did not have the means to travel for leisure. She also could not just abandon her family like BoyBoy did when times were tough. The lack of respect and humility that BoyBoy’s mistress has in Eva’s observation leads her to think that women who do not adhere to traditional gender roles are “immoral,” as Eva comes to think of Sula (her granddaughter) when she matures into a young woman. BoyBoy’s exit out of Medallion and to a place more prosperous, without the responsibilities of being a husband and father was nothing but selfishness. Eva’s travel, by contrast, stemmed from selflessness and a need to survive. Janice M. Sokoloff in “Imitations of Matriarchal Age: Notes on the Mythical Eva in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” highlights Eva’s qualities as a woman and as a mother. Sokoloff describes Eva’s personality as one “of courage, aggression, and indomitable strength” (430). On the surface, Eva appears as cold hearted and unattached to her children. To reiterate Eva’s devotion to her and her family, Eva says rhetorically “Mamma the only one ain’t all right. Cause she didn’t *love* us” (Morrison 68). However, Eva’s unwavering resilience to keep herself and her children alive the winter that BoyBoy left is discussed between her and Hannah. When Hannah asks Eva innocently if she ever played with her and her siblings, Eva’s reaction is one of shock and disbelief. Eva tells Hannah bluntly that there was

No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With all you coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ‘bout I did love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (69)

Without BoyBoy to help raise her children, Eva had to perform the parental roles of both mother and father to take care of her children. Eva had to rely on herself and God in order to survive the tough winter when BoyBoy abandoned her and her children. Again, Morrison depicts Eva's love language as a mother had to be practical and built on survival, so Eva could not be vulnerable and give in to her emotions. She had many responsibilities, and she had to raise her children so they could all survive. Sokoloff explains that "Eva has spent a life time investing in endurance," (433). Eva's mentality that travel must be taken for selfless reasons carries on for the rest of her time in the novel, as travel must be done for the sake of others, and not herself. Eva certainly did not have the luxury and time to play with her children even if she wanted to. The philosophy of travel that Morrison places upon Eva is one of traveling for a purpose, and not of frivolity.

Eva upholds these beliefs especially when Sula returns home from her decade-long absence from the Bottom. In Eva's eyes, Sula followed her passions on a whim. While Morrison does not make the comparison that Sula strongly parallels BoyBoy, it is noteworthy that both characters traveled out of self-seeking pleasure instead of obligation. Eva gives Sula a similar treatment like she did with BoyBoy when he came back to the Bottom after his three year absence. When Sula comments that Eva should say hello to her after not seeing her for ten years, Eva retorts with "[i]f folks let someone know where they is and when they coming, then other folks can get ready for them. If they don't - if they just pop in all sudden like - then they got to take whatever mood they find" (Morrison 90-1). In her unexpected return, like BoyBoy, Sula has the airs of someone well-traveled and not humble in Eva's viewpoint. To connect to BoyBoy's attitude when conversing with Eva, Morrison writes he "exude[s] an odor of new money and idleness" (36). Eva's point of reference of traveling to different areas is to continue and maintain family survival, and not of self-gratification. BoyBoy did not travel for survival,

and neither did Sula. Eva, however, can tell Sula about her feelings about her travels and lack of purpose unlike she ever could with BoyBoy. In her altercation with Sula, Eva says to her “[i]t ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need . . . I’m a tell you what you need” (91). Eva then condemns Sula for her seemingly lack of purpose in life, as she feels like idleness and not living the way that Black women should in their community is not respectable. As Morrison stays true to her objective storytelling throughout *Sula*, the novel positions its opinions of Black female travel to a personal choice, opinions in which each character explains for herself through her actions and words.

While Eva’s travels are for the survival of the family, Nel’s sense of travel signifies a need to support family during hardships and of recognizing that travel is merely a once in a lifetime event for her. Nel’s travel originates out of familial love. In the second chapter of Morrison’s *Sula*, Nel travels with her mother to go to a funeral for Nel’s great-great grandmother in New Orleans. At the young age of ten, Nel experiences culture shock not only from encountering racism in the Jim Crow South, but also meeting her French Creole family members who run a brothel. Although Nel’s travel was not one made out of choice (as it was a funeral after all!), she feels as if the trip made her into a new young girl. Morrison narrates that “she had gone on a real trip, and now she was different” (28) and that Nel tells herself “‘I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel, I’m me. Me’” (28). Nel feels like she does not belong to her parents or anyone else for that matter. She finds her (short-lived) independence after her trip, and finds this travel important to her formation of worldviews. Other lives exist outside of what she knows, and finds self-satisfaction in knowing about different ways of living. Nel asserts herself as a young girl who wants to create her own individuality. Nel had not known places outside Medallion, and of course these were new possibilities of new life. But, Nel’s travel “was the last

as well as the first time she was ever to leave Medallion” (29). Morrison foreshadows Nel not leaving the Bottom, and having her identity revolve around the traditional gender norms of her community. Morrison sets Nel up to be a doting wife and mother when Nel matures into a woman. Her sense of independence she had as a child would evaporate quickly as it came. Her family exists in the realm of the Bottom, so everyone and everything that she could possibly want exists in just one area. Her mother, who left New Orleans to have a life of respectability, shielded herself and Nel from the distasteful family that Helene saw in her relatives to cultivate a life of Christian morals. Nel’s travel to New Orleans can be read as a cautionary tale: Helene traveled out of a need to differentiate herself from the family she grew up from, a family where the women are sex workers. When Nel makes the comment about her grandmother’s skin being soft, Helene responds back with “[m]uch handled things are always soft” (27), alluding to her grandmother having soft skin to be sexually desirable to customers in a demeaning way. In showing a young Nel that if she does not grow up to be a woman who adheres to Christian doctrine, she will end up like her grandmother and great-grandmother who do not have respectable lives as Helene does.

To understand Nel’s travel to New Orleans and the effect it had on her, her mother held a strong influence over Nel’s behavior. Helene’s disdain for her childhood home of New Orleans stems from the fact that not only her mother was a sex worker, but she lived in a house where sex workers did their business. Marrying a respectable man and joining the most conservative church in the Bottom, Helene does not want Nel to have the childhood experiences she had in New Orleans. She wants to show Nel how to maintain good appearances. When Helene and Nel get back from New Orleans, Helene makes the comment that “‘I’ve never been so glad to see this place’” (27). Their home signifies cleanliness, order, free from any stigma imaginable. Helene

prepares Nel from an early age that she will be maternal and domestic, that Nel will not need to travel or search for someone far away. Morrison writes that Helene's childrearing of Nel left her "obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). With Helene raising Nel to be the perfect Black mother in her eyes, men will naturally want to propose marriage and to start a respectable family. Helene finds a woman who lives with her prescribed morals respectable in her eyes. With Helene's and Nel's travel to New Orleans in the beginning of *Sula*, Nel learns from her mother that travel equates with viewing her home and her town as more morally upstanding because she lived in a tidy home, free of the influence of brothels that Helene grew up in. The world outside of Medallion is a gilded image according to Helene: other towns or cities may look pristine, but underneath the pretty aesthetic of the city, corruption exists.

Fast forward to adulthood, Nel becomes the Black wife and mother who devotes her time and energy to raising a family, making her bound to Medallion for the rest of her life. She transitioned from a young girl who held onto any remaining freedom and independence with Sula to a young woman who settled down with her husband Jude and had children with him. A mother's personality for Nel is to be quiet and show unconditional love to her husband and children. When Sula makes Nel laugh when Sula returns to Medallion after ten years, their "duet . . . frightened the cat and made the children run in from the back yard, puzzled at first by the wild free sounds, then delighted to see her mother stumbling merrily toward the bathroom, holding on to her stomach, fairly singing through the laughter" (97). Morrison uses adjectives such as "wild" (97) and "free" (97) to highlight the contradiction of how Nel acts in the moment with Sula versus what Nel usually does as a wife and mother. Not surprisingly, the ladies' chatter gives Nel a feeling of existing for herself, as she made apparent in her return from New Orleans

as a child. The return of Sula brings feelings of nostalgia for not just Sula, but Nel especially. Sula embodies the mentalities of travel that affords someone a sense of independence and an identity based on one's self. Nel's fascination with Sula's travels not only brings her up to date on Sula's whereabouts, but the dichotomy of each woman's differences stand in stark contrast beside each other.

Maggie Galehouse states that "Sula's return to the Bottom after her ten-year absence that the differences between Sula and Nel are tested and the extent of Sula's otherness made manifest" ("New World Woman"<sup>4</sup>). Nel, from the confines of traditional Black womanhood in the Bottom, finds Sula's travels from college and afterwards quite fascinating, as this can be the chance for her to live somewhat vicariously through Sula. However, Sula does not romanticize her experiences of travel to an impressionable Nel. Their differences begin to start especially when Sula and Nel converse about Sula's travels.

"They still here. You the one that went off."

"Didn't I, though?"

"Tell me about it. The big city."

"Big is all it is. A big Medallion."

"No. I mean the life. The nightclubs, and the parties..."

"I was in college, Nellie. No nightclubs on campus."

"Campus? That's what they call it? Well. You wasn't in no college for- what- ten years now? And you didn't write to nobody. How come you never wrote?"

"You never did either." (Morrison 99)

To Nel, Sula is the only person who got the chance to be able to travel and see other parts of the country that Nel can only dream or reminisce about in conjunction to her trip to New Orleans

when she was a child. Nel uses words and phrases that indicate how mesmerized she is about Sula going to do bigger and better things that only Nel could imagine. She views college as a never ending party (““nightclubs and parties”” (99)). Likewise, Nel’s preoccupation with Sula not in correspondence with her family and friends in the Bottom place Sula as an outsider to her own community. While Nel still adores Sula, she finds Sula not as relatable as she used to. Sula’s travels to different cities give her more of a worldview than Nel did traveling to New Orleans as a child. While travel is for familial love for Nel, travel exists out of nostalgia for a time where she had more autonomy. Living vicariously through Sula’s travels and romanticizing them give Nel the excitement that she had not felt since Sula’s departure.

Sula’s travels equate her with breaking gender norms. Like BoyBoy, Sula traveled to find a purpose for herself and to enjoy life beyond her Ohio town. BoyBoy broke his gendered expectation as a faithful husband and attentive father to his children. Likewise, Sula defies expectation as a woman who chooses to be unmarried and childless. Of course, double standards of gender expectations are embedded in everyone in the community, so Sula gets more of the condemnation and disdain from everyone around her. Sula regards Nel as “belong[ing] to the town and all its ways” (120), otherwise known as abiding by the imposed rules in which a Black woman can live and not be ostracized. Nel lives a safe life, a sanitized life where she does not take risks and lives for herself, just like all of the other women in the Bottom. This is a life for Sula that she cannot imagine having for herself. Sula regarded Nel as a near and dear friend, and now that Nel and her grandmother Eva critique her life choices, Sula ends up alone from choosing to go beyond the invisible borders of Medallion.

Nel asserts her identity as a traditional Black woman steeped in Medallion values by demonizing Sula for her actions. Through Sula’s decade-long absence from the Bottom, she

achieved what virtually all Black women from her community could not do: travel and roam around freely. As demonstrated from her grandfather BoyBoy, the act of traveling for one's self-pleasure and fulfillment is a male privilege. In the piece titled "Community and Communitarianism in Toni Morrison: Restoring the Self and Relating with the Other," authors TaeJin Koh and Saera Kwak discuss the individuality of people in a group and how distinct social mores and beliefs are not always uniformed from different groups of similar people based shared identities. They use *Sula* as a basis of exploring this reading of the novel to apply to Nel and Sula's distinct values from one another. In relation to Sula's adherence to more "masculine" traits, Koh and Kwak illustrate that "[Sula's] spirit and power have the potential to change the authority and values of the Black community" (5). For the remainder of the novel, Sula only solidifies the Bottom's resistance to a Black woman moving freely out of their community for a self-fulfilling purpose. This is self-evident in the way that Nel reminds Sula firmly that she is "'a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man'" (Morrison 142). In negating Sula as a woman who does not adhere to the standards of Black femininity in the Bottom, Nel situates herself as someone homely, a Black woman who adheres to the gender and racial politics of their time. She does not go out beyond the limits of the Bottom, and has a limited scope of how other Black women live. Nel's travel to New Orleans so far away from her, all that remains is a sensationalized and rose-tinted glasses view about travel. Nel can only dream of travel now, as she is trapped in the role of a woman that Helene raised her to be: a woman with tact and decorum. Does Nel herself learn at the end of the novel that perhaps Sula had a point of taking control of one's autonomy, that Nel herself can spend the rest of her days beginning to have? The famous epiphany Nel has of "'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude . . . We was girls together'" (174) is that particular moment of eureka, of Nel finally realizing that her



life reflected what her community wanted her to be, what Sula should have been but refused to in part of living beyond Medallion.

Galehouse notes that Nel is the “character who approaches movement, change, and transcendence” (7). Nel truly was the only character who could understand Sula, who really liked being around her. While it took until 1965 for Nel to have her famous epiphany, not only does she lose Sula by death, but her children are also grown and out of the Bottom, and she is separated from Jude after his rendezvous with Sula. All she has is herself, and with this passage, her epiphany starts the process of remembering Sula in a more nuanced light. In retrospect, Nel wanted Sula around to travel with her. Maybe not physically moving from place to place, but travel with Sula through life, or the remainder of time Sula had before her untimely death. If Nel cannot physically travel, Nel can at least grow mentally and holistically. Like Eva, Nel’s travel must be for the needs of the family and of community, a domestic sphere signified by traditional femininity. Sula, on the other hand, travels to enact and preserve her autonomy, while traveling for selfhood is regarded as masculine in the Bottom.

Last, but certainly not least, Sula’s travels are an act of rebellion against the norms and expectations of the Bottom. She is a trailblazer for the next generation of young Black girls and women to discover themselves outside of their hegemonic norms. To understand how Sula rebels in a world where white supremacy and Black patriarchy try to confine her to roles she does not want to exist in, Georgina Lawton’s personal essay explains the significance of Black solo travel. Not only does Lawton give personal snippets of her experiences of traveling as a Black woman, but she provides essential background on why Black female autonomy is radical. Lawton writes that “the movement of black bodies has been strictly controlled . . . Black bodies were simply a tool for capitalist production, a means to an end, and as such, our access to leisure travel was

denied” (“Why Black Solo”). Slavery relied on Black bodies to make white capitalists and slaveowners rich, and without any autonomy, Black slaves could not move around society freely. Centuries of restricted movement due to slavery along with general misogynistic attitudes about women in general are in the minds of the Bottom residents. In just one of the many examples of the community looking down upon Sula, Morrison provides the reader about what the residents do in Sula’s presence, writing “the old women [drew] their lips together, made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her (Morrison 112-3). Sula’s sheer desire to follow her own path despite what people think about her, and insist what is good for her too. Despite her naysayers, Sula sets out to do what she plans to do. Lawton emphasizes the empowerment behind traveling while Black and female, stating that “Black female travel can therefore be seen as a radical act, a tool of rebellion, an allegory for emancipation that allows us to redefine our position in the world” (“Why Black Solo”). Unlike the other women in the novel, Sula cannot let anyone dictate who she is, and for this, this is freedom. With such a negative reputation bestowed upon Sula unfairly, no matter what Sula does, she will be met with discontent and hostility.

In a prime example, Sula and Nel argue about Sula’s choices in her life on Sula’s deathbed. Sula lived her life how she wanted to, despite what others in her community had to say about her personal decisions. Sula tells Nel that Sula will “[go] down like one of those redwoods,” (143) and that she “sure did live in this world” (143). The reader does not know much about Sula’s decade-long absence from the Bottom. Besides going to college and exploring the country, Sula’s pride in knowing that she lived a life she wanted, and not what others wanted for her, is above all else what she set out to do in her short life. These notions of independence are spelled out by Sula to Nel on Sula’s deathbed, as she tells Nel “I don’t know everything. I

just do everything” (143). Sula is an educated Black woman, as few Black women had the opportunity to attend higher education and learn beyond their sole communities. A purpose of higher education is to expand one’s horizons, and with Sula’s open-minded attitude about life, a college environment of constant learning and discovery fits her mentality well. Travel for Sula was part of an overall legacy for herself, as she travels alone to discover more about herself and to stand firmly in her beliefs and philosophies about living life to her fullest potential. She returns to the Bottom more worldly, and despite the cruel reactions from her community, she dies knowing that she set out for what she wanted to do.

In Sula’s travels to exemplify her status as a Black woman who refuses to stay within the hegemonies that attempt to control and dilute her independent spirit, she does this to sustain herself despite criticism from her community. The most vocal and disdainful person to critique Sula’s life decisions is her grandmother Eva. Returning home to the Bottom after Sula’s decade-long absence, she and Eva quickly get into the argument about how Sula does not resemble the type of Black woman Eva and the other citizens of the Bottom expect her to embody. When Eva nags Sula about whether or not she will ever settle down and start a family, Sula vehemently shuts Eva down, stating plainly and boldly that ““I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison 92). Sula does not exist for other people, and certainly she refuses to compromise her freedom and self-confidence for others. Sula made herself during those travels, both externally and internally, a type of action that Eva and Nel did not have when traveling. In traveling for self-discovery, Sula was able to cross dichotomies of “female” travel equating with familial obligations (Eva and Nel) and “male” travel (Sula) as a self-guided odyssey. One might think that Eva and the other residents of the Bottom would commend Sula for determining the life she adheres to, since few, if any of the Bottom’s residents, can move as freely as Sula can.

Yet given the time period and the overall attitudes of the Bottom, a Black woman cultivating as much autonomy as she can places her as an enemy of the community.

Despite the criticism, Sula defends herself against her condescending grandmother, and does not let her, or anyone else for that matter, dictate the kind of Black woman she is. Lawton writes that “[w]e travel because we are lucky enough to venture to places our parents never could, to live out the dreams and intentions of our ancestors and be a part of a generation for whom free movement is finally feasible” (“Why Black Solo”). While Sula may not be part of the generation of Black women that Lawton refers to in her article, Sula is one of the trailblazers for traveling for personal fulfillment, a type of travel diametrically opposite from Eva, who had to travel for survival and of Nel, who traveled out of familial obligations and as a foreshadowing of her status as a domestic Black woman. Travel for Sula means autonomy and self-pleasure, a type of travel that was not afforded to her grandmother or to her one and only best friend. Despite the negativity that her family and her community imposed on her, Sula never let her spirit falter or be extinguished by the naysayers.

Travel in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* questions how and why Black women in the novel move in and out of the Bottom. As the novel is about breaking binaries and embracing the ambiguity of nature, the novel addresses these concepts in relation to the reasons as to why the women in the novel travel. For Eva, travel represents her survival of her family in order to survive as a single mother of three young children. As for Nel, she travels out of respect for the passing of her great-great grandmother and establishes her role as a Black woman devoted to family and maintaining the domestic sphere of life. Unlike both Eva and Nel, Sula’s travels stem from her own desires to sustain her independence and to create a space for herself to follow her mind and heart as a single, childless Black woman. Morrison remains ambivalent and does not insert her own

feelings towards the characters' rationale for travel. In the spirit of ambivalence that Morrison presents to her readers, the ideas of each woman's purpose of travel is a personal one, choices that they make based on their circumstances and relation to what feels right for them. This, in hindsight, allows for further discussion about the ways in which travel is presented in *Sula*.

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### Sounds as a Means of Dialogue: Black Nondiegetic Voices in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet*

How does a playwright demonstrate on stage a character's inner dialogue besides the bread and butter techniques, such as an aside or a soliloquy? These personal conversations must be done orally, as unlike in television and film, screenwriters and directors use voice overs for character's thoughts as a scene happens or have a flashback where the audience understands that what they see exists in the character's mind. Theatre must use different conventions to portray the inner mechanisms of a character effectively and to not break the fourth wall. (Unless, that is, an intention of theirs.) Using sound in theatre usually exists for practical sound effects to immerse the people watching that they are not in a theatre watching actors perform, but instead visit the world in which the characters live. Yet, sound provides inner dialogue that can be in replacement of a traditional aside or soliloquy, and can produce a more impactful understanding that a character may not be able to express in words coherently.

*Harlem Duet* is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, but set in Harlem in the late 1990s. As a prequel adaptation to Shakespeare's play, *Harlem Duet* is about a Black woman named Billie, who is left by her ex-husband Othello for a white woman named Mona. Billie's devastation leads her to a mental spiral and a disbelief that she, a Black woman who initially married a Black man concerned with keeping his Black American culture, assimilates into the white hegemony that is Mona and his white colleagues at Columbia University. She and Othello quarrel over Othello's shedding of his Black identity and how her dreams of a thriving Black community and Black marriage shatter. Their differences of how to perceive their Black identities echo in the voices of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey via audio clips of their speeches. Billie aligns herself with thinkers of an Afrocentric society such as

X and Garvey, while Othello aligns himself with thinkers of more of a post-racial society, such as King.

In Djanet Sears' play *Harlem Duet*, Sears' script incorporates the use of sound clips from prominent Black activists who have their own understanding of Black power and advancement for Black rights in the United States. In using a variety of Black activist voices, the audience listens to these activists while they hear the characters on stage say their lines. These audio clips serve as an undercurrent for how characters generally feel about their predicaments at hand, as a portion of this play concerns itself with how to perceive Black racial advancement and sustained growth. In *Harlem Duet*, the play's clashing Black ideologies allows to peer into the ideologies that run through both Billie and Othello's minds.

The overall setting of the play, along with the three different time eras, all happen in the same geographical area in Harlem. The earliest time setting in the play is in 1860, where a Black couple wants to leave Harlem to Nova Scotia, a free safe haven from American slavery. The second earliest time setting is in 1928, where a Black actor performs in minstrel shows, much to his wife's discomfort. The present time setting of the play, the late 1990s, is where I will discuss the elements of audio clips in *Harlem Duet* and as they serve for an inner dialogue. It is important to note that in the scenes of the past, the couple is played by Billie and Othello's actors. For each of the scenes of the past, the Black male character leaves the Black woman character for a white woman. The present day's plot of *Harlem Duet* duplicates this story to a more contemporary time, demonstrating that these conversations about Black identity continue to affect Black folks. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's article "Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*" presents *Harlem Duet* in such similar terms, suggesting that "[t]he sense of dislocation—or living between worlds—



created by the play's structure is bolstered by Sears's strategic use of sound design. Sears examines the lives of [Black folks] who are forced to live in the space in between, an idea voiced in Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*" (162).

While Othello desperately tries to assimilate himself in white society and remove his Black identity from him, his denial of racial and cultural politics lead him to a place of existing in two different worlds. For example, in Act One, Scene Nine of *Harlem Duet*, Othello tells Billie "I drink the same water, read the same books. You're the problem if you don't see beyond my skin . . . I am not my skin. My skin is not me" (Sears 305). His reaction comes from Billie and Othello arguing over Black feminism and how he feels like his marriage with Billie felt intimidating because of her adherence to Black feminist ideology, a more Afrocentric ideal. Billie reminds him about his disdain for Black feminists in particular. In the stage directions before Othello's monologue to Billie in this scene, Sears' stage directions calls for Malcolm X's audio recording of himself asking "'What difference does colour make?'" (305). As X himself aligned more with racial unity towards the end of his own life, Othello too has a shift of how he views his Blackness as just a physiological part of him instead of an identity shaped by those around him. In just this example alone, Sears incorporates these audio clips to bring different theatrical narration front and center.

The present setting of *Harlem Duet* takes place "in a renovated brownstone, at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards (125th & Lennox)" (285). Not only does Sears situate the play geographically in a specific intersection in Harlem, but the intersection in which two historically differing Black activists in terms of how to conceptualize Black identity is a core theme in the play. To emphasize the importance of the physical setting of *Harlem Duet*, Joanne Tompkins in "The Politics of Location in *Othello*, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, and Ong

Keng Sen's *Desdemona*" writes that "Sears's play attempts to map a relatively accurate history of place, and of Black history in that place. It is a compendium of African-American history, making reference to famous African-American historical figures . . . so that African history in North America is performed and thus documented on stage" (272). This is a geographical landmark in Harlem, and Sears uses this physical space of the play's setting to create a dynamic Black culture. Again, the streets' names are critical to understanding the major ideologies of racial equity that often are at odds with one another too. King promoted more of the approach of integration of Black folks in white society, while X promoted a much more Afrocentric, Black Nationalist ideology to combat racism. In doing so, Sears places each character in the play depending on how they feel about their Black identity and the world in racialized terms. These conversations the characters have represent the kinds of discourse King and X spoke about not just in their own lifetimes, but the character's own lifetimes too. Both of these ideologies of Black liberation fall under a continuum, as Sears employs other Black activist speakers within these parameters to accompany each scene within *Harlem Duet*. In order to understand the main conflict of the play, I will first examine MLK, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech in relation to the conversation that Billie and Othello have requires prominent attention. This auditory dialogue signifies just one of the many instances where the play's use of speech echoes each characters' stream of consciousnesses.

In Act One, Scene Four, the stage directions call for an audio recording in which "*Martin Luther King continues his dream, its relationship to the American Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence*" (Sears 297). The "dream" in question refers to MLK, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech that occurred at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 during the March on Washington for a demand of jobs and freedom for Black Americans. Here, the audio recording

of King demonstrates that his dream of racial unity reflects the initial equality in which the writers of the American Constitution and of the Declaration of Independence wanted for every American (i.e. “All men are created equal.”). King believed in reconciliation and healing of the country. As he says in his “I Have A Dream” speech: “We [Black men and women] refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” The dream that MLK, Jr. desires is one of racial unity between white and Black America and for Black Americans to unite for a single cause instead of in-group disagreement.

In *Harlem Duet*, the opposite of racial unity occurs between Billie and Othello, with King’s “I Have A Dream Speech” reverberating in the background to provide a stream of consciousness. In this scene, Othello comes by to the apartment and he and Billie get into an argument over Black liberation politics. More specifically, Billie and Othello argue over affirmative action. Othello is an instructor at Columbia University, a predominately white campus located in Harlem. Othello and his other white colleagues want to challenge affirmative action. This surprises Billie and she cannot believe Othello for challenging the promotion he got. Before they begin to argue again over Othello’s decision, both of them quote from King’s “I Have A Dream” speech to showcase racial inequalities of the past that Othello showed to his colleagues:

BILLIE: ‘America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her . . .

OTHELLO & BILLIE: . . . citizens of colour are concerned.

OTHELLO: Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given its coloured people a . . .

OTHELLO & BILLIE: bad cheque . . .

BILLIE: a cheque that has come back marked . . .

OTHELLO & BILLIE: . . . “insufficient funds”.’ (Sears 299)

Othello’s rationale for challenging affirmative action is for “[his] peers to respect [him]” (299), as he feels under the microscope and pressure to not use his status as a Black man to victimize himself more than he should. In regards to Othello and Billie quoting from King, the audio clip explains as to why Othello wants to move to a post-racial world. For Othello, his successes and his contributions should be for his actual talent, not because he wants to be promoted because of workplaces making up for the centuries of forced subjugation of racial minorities. His fiancée and white colleague Mona is brought up in conversation, as Othello tells Billie that Mona “really sees me. She was the only other faculty to support me on the MLK Day assembly” (299). He continues: “They understood. For a moment I got them to understand” (299).

Othello looks for racial unity, as he wants to live in a post racial world where the color of one’s skin does not need to be brought to attention. On the other hand, Billie understands that she cannot live in a post racial world, as her Blackness defines her and she does not have the privilege of being a man in the United States. After Billie and Othello orate MLK, Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech word to word, their argument escalates further when the fractured duo talks about MLK, Jr.’s stance on racial equity.

BILLIE: The man was a... a...

OTHELLO: Poet... Visionary...

BILLIE: A prophet.

OTHELLO: After all he’d been through in his life, he could still see that at a deeper level we’re all the same.

(Pause.)

BILLIE: I'm not the same.

OTHELLO: In the eyes of God, Billie, we're all the same.

BILLIE: One day little Black boys and little White girls -

OTHELLO: You're delusional.

BILLIE: You're the one looking for White respect. (299)

Billie vehemently critiques Othello's post-racial attitudes, as she finds it baffling that he can just remove his Black identity and his history so he can remove himself from his Black community to try to fit into white society. In Billie's perspective, "White respect" (299) is just a way for Othello's white colleagues to whitewash him into a "respectable" Black man. Othello did not have internalized anti-Black racism towards himself until he spent more time working at the university, and Billie thinks Othello lost his sanity.

In relation to MLK's "I Have A Dream" speech, King makes a point that "[us Black men and women should] not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." King does not want to see Black folks hating on white folks, as holding onto anger and spite encourages and grows divisions among groups of people. In addition, King states that he dreams that "little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." Playing off of this particular line, Billie says "little Black boys and little *White* girls" (Sears 299, emphasis mine) to highlight Othello's infidelity towards Billie. Billie has no respect for people who want to be colorblind and to live in a post racial life. Even more so, she hardly has respect for Othello for willingly assimilating into upper middle class white society and removing himself from his Black community. In characterizing Othello, Brown-Guillory says that "Othello struts upon the stage as a vapid,

pseudointellectual who is enamored of white privilege and disdainful of the black struggle proliferating around him in Harlem” (159). Billie tries to explain to Othello that he cannot evade his Black identity and history, and that living in a post racial society is impossible when racism and inequality still exist.

Othello feels concerned that Billie subscribes to Afrocentric beliefs and feels animosity towards Mona and Othello’s colleagues. Othello feels that King feels close to his ideologies of wanting to be in a post-racial society, and chooses to implement a post-racial identity. Billie finds King’s speech overly simplistic and that King himself is not radical enough for her. In steeping herself with the ideologies of Malcolm X and other prominent Afrocentric activists, she feels like Othello made himself digestible for his white colleagues and Mona. Othello called out their racism gently, but Billie would not be gentle. MLK’s “I Have A Dream” speech playing over such a heated discussion underscores just how opposite Billie and Othello feel about Black life and liberation. While MLK’s speech only solidifies Othello’s view of a harmonic, post racial world politically, Billie’s words serve a different kind of dream: a personal dream of a Black utopia and a dream of returning to how her life was before Othello ended their marriage.

As Othello aligns himself more with the audio recording of MLK’s intended message in his “I Have A Dream” speech, Billie’s alignment in relation to this speech reinforces her Afrocentric point of view, one where harmony lies in being faithful to one’s spouse and community. She critiques Othello’s desire to whitewash himself and to fall in love with whiteness, reminding him of how he cannot remove himself from Blackness, no matter how hard he tries. Billie apologizes to Othello, telling him “I’m sorry... I am sorry. I had a dream. A dream that one day a Black man and a Black woman might find... Where jumping a broom was a solemn eternal vow” (Sears 300). She dreams of thriving in a world where the white gaze does

not directly affect her, where her marriage did not disintegrate from under her feet. Her dreams of having a strong (Black) community are torn from her due to Othello's unfaithfulness. Billie cannot even imagine how or why Othello can abandon her.

Billie's stream of consciousness in thinking about the ways in which the "I Have A Dream" speech does not align with her ideals of Afrocentrism is in the thoughts of her failed marriage. Jumping to the second act of *Harlem Duet* in Scene Seven, she has a mental breakdown over her loss of her marriage, repeating MLK's lines of "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight" from his "I Have A Dream" speech, but her speech is disjointed and she disassociates from reality entirely in front of her landlady Magi. While this happens towards the end of the play, the stage directions call for the audio to be "distorted" (Sears 313) and "dissonant" (313). The distortion of noises encapsulates Billie's fragile psyche, as she cannot think clearly and feels out of touch with herself and of reality. As the sound clips play during the play's progression, this is Billie's mind spiraling out of control, a panic attack already wreaking havoc in her thoughts. Yet when she sees Othello for the first time in person after having a few phone conversations in two months, that familiarity of having such a voice as MLK recite his eloquent and idealistic speech about racial harmony underscores more of Othello's desire for post racial politics and desires for white assimilation. For Billie, her conversation with Othello as "I Have A Dream" plays in the background to explain the broken dreams and promises that she must piece together somehow.

On the other side of the racial equity debate is the one of Black nationalism, most notably in the play's usage of Malcolm X's audio recordings. If *Harlem Duet* uses audio clips to provide additional context and commentary to the characters' inner dialogue and the particular

conversations they have at hand, then it does not come at a surprise that other Black influential voices support the words uttered in the play. In one instance where Malcolm X speaks about Black nationalism, this audio occurs in Act Two, Scene Seven as a means in a flashback with Billie and Othello moving to Harlem for the first time. In the play, Billie suffers from a nervous breakdown after Othello gets the remainder of his possessions from their apartment. Her mental state deteriorates throughout the duration of the play, but this particular scene depicts Billie at her breaking point. To reiterate, the stage directions of Act Two, Scene Seven state that “[t]he plucked strings and the distorted audio loop have become even more dissonant” (Sears 313). Again, the audio loop features many different Black leaders’ speeches all trying to speak at the same time, overwhelming Billie. In a similar vein, Brown-Guillory remarks that “Billie is challenged by the cacophony of voices” (164) since she is thinking about everything that has happened between her and Othello. In Billie’s flashback, she and Othello move into their Harlem apartment, with Billie thrilled to be submerged into Black culture. Othello’s appearance in the flashback demonstrates his former alignment with Black culture, as the stage directions reveal that he wears “a brightly colored dashiki” (Sears 314) and he tells Billie that his white colleagues at Columbia University need to “take . . . on a cultural field trip [to] blow their minds” (314). In Billie’s flashback, Othello was the man that she married, who she planned to spend the rest of her life with. Othello wanted to show his colleagues his own Black culture, that he was proud of being Black. In such a place as Harlem, Othello could educate his white colleagues on what Harlem and Black culture means for him and other Black folks. A strong and vibrant community with a rich history, Harlem is a Black sanctuary and utopia that Billie upholds through her presence in this scene, with Malcolm X echoing the thoughts that she similarly has in her mind.



*Harlem Duet* uses Malcolm X's speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" to vocalize a need for strong Black communities and for Black folks to support and uplift one another. Pertinent to the flashback scene in *Harlem Duet*, X explains to the spectators at his speech that "[w]e ourselves have to lift the level of our community, the standard of our community to a higher level, make our own society beautiful so that we will be satisfied in our own social circles" ("The Ballot or the Bullet"). X refers to how white communities and folks do not reciprocate the social and economic sustenance of Black communities when Black folks regularly interact and shop in white hegemonic spaces. If the white hegemony will not sustain Black communities, then this duty falls in the hands of Black folks. In order for a thriving Black community, there must be love for sustaining such a community. In Billie's flashback in the play, her conversation with Othello echoes X's own sentiments about a thriving Black community:

BILLIE: I longed for this sanctuary.

OTHELLO: I know what you mean.

BILLIE: Black boutiques.

OTHELLO: Black bookstores.

BILLIE: Black groceries.

OTHELLO: Filled with Black doctors and dentists. Black banks.

BILLIE: Black streets teeming with loud Black people listening to loud Jazz and reggae and Aretha ... (Sears 314-5)

Harlem is a Black sanctuary for Billie and for Othello, before he internalizes anti-Black rhetoric when he gets closer to his white colleagues at the university. For both of them, their mutual joy in the beginning of their lives together exalts excitement and a fresh start to their new lives as a young married couple. Their enthusiasm for living in such a historic Black community such as

Harlem allows for the couple to engage in a Black centric community, a utopia for Billie especially to thrive as a member of this significant community. In such a technique as employing audio loops with each scene of *Harlem Duet*, the play engages with parallel yet similar conversations between Black prominent speakers and of the characters. Malcolm X's voice in the selection of Black voices amplifies the play's stance on strong interpersonal Black communities, a stance in which Billie upholds.

Last, but certainly not least, audio loops playing in each scene of *Harlem Duet* engages with the ideas of Black sustainment, as Act One, Scene Three in the play uses an audio recording of the Black philosopher Marcus Garvey to echo the need of a singular home for all Black folks around the world. This audio recording aligns more with the beliefs that Malcolm X has rather than Martin Luther King, Jr. The stage directions for this scene ask for "*an oral address by Marcus Garvey on the need for African Americans to return to Africa*" (294). Sears' inclusion of Garvey's speech promotes the love of Blackness that Billie certainly holds dear to her heart. In this early scene of the play, it begins as a lighthearted conversation between Amah and Magi about love and marriage, echoing Act One, Scene One of the play. When Magi leaves, Amah and Billie have a conversation about Billie's worsening depression from Othello's infidelity. Billie then tells Amah about seeing an interracial couple at the subway station, and relaying to her about the hyper fixation Billie has about the blonde, white woman in the arms of a Black man. When a stranger brushes past Billie without noticing her, Billie tells Amah "[t]hen a sound emanating from . . . from . . . from my uterus, slips out of my mouth, shatters the spell. They turn their heads - the couple. They see me. It isn't even him" (296). Billie's bodily metaphor is understood as a cry for Othello breaking his vow of sustaining his marriage to Billie. The uterus as a bodily organ cultivates a potential for life. Without Othello around to sustain their marriage,

her uterus in this metaphorical sense cries out in loss. Seeing what Billie thinks is Othello and Mona at the subway station, Othello's desire to marry someone else with a uterus that can cultivate life and marriage with him shakes Billie to her core. In Billie's perspective, Othello's choosing of a uterus in a white body tears her apart. To extend this uterus metaphor further, Harlem itself functions as a womb. Harlem cultivates Blackness and historically has done so. Harlem sustains Billie especially, and now that Othello ripped himself apart, the womb that is Harlem is ruptured and is in critical need of repair. David Huebert shares a similar sentiment in "Othello's Testicles, Sybil's Womb: The Interracial Child in *Harlem Duet* and its Progenitor," as he posits that "the sight of Othello and Mona together signals the death of the future insofar as [B]lack community has been polluted by whiteness" (42). The love of Blackness that Othello rejects wounds Billie, as she must heal after losing the love of her life. Garvey's audio reflects the sentiments that Billie has in regards to needing a nurturing place to cultivate a thriving Black community.

Marcus Garvey delivered a speech titled "If You Believe the Negro Has a Soul" or as commonly remembered as "Back to Africa" in 1921. This speech entails how Black people from all over the world should relocate back to African countries in order to sustain a thriving Black population after forced removal from the continent due to slavery and the mistreatment of Black folks in hegemonic white countries. In the content of *Harlem Duet* and its usage of Garvey's speech, he echoes Billie's sentiment about sustaining Black relationships with his closing remarks of "[w]e want to build up cities, nations, governments, industries of our own in Africa, so that we will be able to have a chance to rise from the lowest to the highest position in the African Commonwealth" ("If You Believe"). Billie wanted to build a strong bond with Othello during her marriage to him, and she wanted to sustain a loving Black relationship. Yet, Othello's

infidelity shattered her expectations of a thriving Black relationship in historic Harlem. Garvey's speech, like Billie's uterus metaphor, uses the African continent as his own metaphor for cultivating new life, as one such function of a uterus. Playing this audio recording against the backdrop of Act One, Scene Three of *Harlem Duet* gives a sense of longing for developing and sustaining Black love and life that Billie lost. This scene examines Billie's psyche of losing her ex-husband and of losing much more than him. The usage of audio recordings in the play supply additional context to characters' feelings and thoughts.

Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and the usage of audio recordings in scenes as a non-diegetic means to give the play an additional layer of meaning and significance demonstrates the ways in which characters feel and believe what is right to them. Without this technique in the play, among the other auditory cues from each scene, the play would lack the effects that it employs throughout its duration. While the examples explained and analyzed in this essay certainly do not cover the entirety of the play and its diverse usage of Black speakers in *Harlem Duet*, sharing such voices such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey are just some of the many voices that amplify the characters' personal philosophies in *Harlem Duet*. The lines spoken by characters allude to various philosophies and past historical events that Black folks experienced throughout history. Adding the audio recordings to each scene allows for contextualization that the characters do not provide. In such a theatrical technique, layering such dialogues to compliment yet parallel one another gives *Harlem Duet* the technical and artistic aesthetic that it has by showcasing Black voices to a play that is unapologetically Black.

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The “I” in “Rights” Stands for “Inclusion”: Activist Language and Rhetoric in Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*

Activism in and of itself can be a great place to share ideas on how groups of people can advance their cause to suit the needs of their communities. When people discuss in a dialogue about the ways in which a cause can move forward with a general consensus, a movement transforms and changes itself gradually. Sometimes, activism leaves out certain people within the community that is being advocated for, which leads to a dissonance of consensus and agreement among the community as a whole. Exclusion in activism is in itself counterproductive, as activism seeks to unite similar people to champion for a cause. Likewise, activism can fall prey to not having a well-rounded representation of leadership. When a few people are heralded for a cause, this leads to misrepresentation in remembering who led a movement, and ignoring more marginalized voices within a community uniting for a cause.

In the context of this essay, The Civil Rights Movement immortalized such Black activists who championed for Black rights, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am not insinuating that we should divert our attention from King. far from it. When we lose focus on lesser known leaders or even voices of the Civil Rights Movement who championed or had ideas for the direction of the movement to just big name activists, we run the risk of erasing important people. How do we begin to examine the Civil Rights Movement in ways to include voices of the ignored? Katori Hall’s play *The Mountaintop* begins to ponder these questions.

In Katori Hall’s play *The Mountaintop*, Hall creates a fictional version of King to imagine what transpired on the eve of his death in 1968. Tired and weary of being trampled upon white supremacy and anti-Black racism, he wants to do bigger and better demonstrations and marches. He then meets Camae, a young working-class Black housekeeper who is actually an

angel to carry him into the afterlife. Full of spirit and an energy that radiates with every word, Camae represents the underrepresented voices of the Civil Rights Movement. While she does not directly partake in the activism and demonstrations, her viewpoints about Black liberation clash with King's stance on nonviolent and peaceful protest. Likewise, the way she speaks and thinks about Black activism contains linguistic differences from King's. By including Black voices that use African American Vernacular/Black English that also have more radical views about Black power, Hall reimagines what Civil Rights Era activism sounded like. While Camae may be a fictional character, she represents the unrepresented and uncredited voices of Black folks in her time. *The Mountaintop* presents King and Camae's ideologies as a way in which all voices of the Black community should be listened to and discussed within their community in order to form coalitions to move towards racial equity.

Throughout the play, Camae speaks in Black Vernacular English. In *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, April Baker-Bell explains that Black American slaves formed this particular English dialect to communicate with one another for survival and to understand one another (64). With its own linguistic rules, Black Vernacular English is rule-based like any other English dialect. However, Black English Vernacular has its opponents and challengers, mainly those who insist that the dialect sounds "improper" or "grammatically incorrect" (20). Not surprisingly, then, these people who criticize Black Americans who use Black Vernacular English usually are white Americans who demand English to be spoken without any Black linguistic traits.

Right from the beginning of *The Mountaintop*, Camae speaks in her Black Vernacular English dialect as she introduces herself: "Well, I been called Quickie Camae befo'" (Hall 29). In the hegemonic vernacular of English, Camae is saying "Well, I *have* been called Quickie



Camae *before*” (29, emphasis of words mine). In the Black Vernacular English dialect, Camae’s syntax differs because she uses a lot of the syntax rule of habitual be (in her omitting of the word ‘have’ in ‘have been’), in which Baker-Bell says that this category “indicates habitual meaning or a recurring state or activity and suggests that something regularly or usually happens” (76). Likewise, Camae does not pronounce the end of some of her words, such as “befo” (Hall 29). Again, Baker-Bell provides an introductory grammar lesson in Black Vernacular English, as what Camae did grammatically is referred to as dropping the final consonant cluster in the word ‘before,’ as ‘befo,” a unique grammar variation commonly used in Black Vernacular English (Baker-Bell 77). Of course, Camae employs so many other grammar and linguistic traits that are in Black Vernacular English, but right from the start of the play, her English dialect differs from King’s.

King, on the other hand, mainly speaks a so-called Standard American English dialect that aligns with hegemony. It is worth noting that Hall’s characterization of King in *The Mountaintop* does not have an issue with Camae speaking in Black Vernacular English, as he occasionally adds phrases and linguistic style to his every day, non-activist speech. He does, however, make remarks about Camae’s language use after giving a King-like speech but with her own style and vocal cadence. These language differences give he and Camae their own outlooks on how to perceive their word and the injustices around them.

One instance of how King and Camae use their different English dialects is in the form of code-switching. After Camae’s speech in which she boldly declares “[f]uck the white man!” (Hall 46), King makes the remark that “[n]ot too many maids [spout] off well-formed diatribes like that” (48). Defensively, Camae asks him whether or not poor, Black people such as Camae can speak like he can, and whether or not he thinks that people such as Camae are unintelligent

(48). King attempts to explain to Camae that “most maids don’t sound like professors” (48). In a broad context, the play’s version of MLK Jr. implies that most working class, poor Black Americans do not sound “educated” enough to be renowned as eloquent, memorable speakers. What King really means to say is that Camae’s code-switching from a hegemonic American English to a Black English surprises him because he did not think she could switch dialects depending on who she speaks to. This is echoed in HuffPost’s YouTube video titled “What is Code-Switching? Between the Lines.” Taryn Finley, the 2018 editor of HuffPost’s Black Voices, tell us that Blackness needs to be commodified and altered in spaces where Blackness is a “threat” and that Blackness inherently means “trouble” in white spaces (“What is Code-Switching?”). In the context of *The Mountaintop*, if someone like Camae were to speak out against anti-Black racism using Black Vernacular English, many people would find her dialect of English “unintelligent” and find her “brash,” as indicated in a society where anti-Black racism exists. While King makes a comment in poor taste to Camae, this scene serves as one of the many indicators that in order for anti-Black racism rhetoric to be heard, Black folks often have to play with respectability politics to get other people to take them seriously.

King code-switches when delivering sermons and speeches to a big national audience, for he must speak carefully and with acute attention not to irritate already discontented white audiences. In order to survive in a white hegemonic world, King needs to code-switch. In King’s assertion that Camae can speak “well,” he internalizes the belief that she does not adhere to notions of respectability politics. For Hall, code-switching and dictating how Black communities think other people in their communities should speak to one another does more harm and only fuels anti-Black racism.

Code-switching happens for both King and Camae, but it does not happen that often. When they swap for Black Vernacular English or hegemonic English, they take on different roles. For example, King only code-switches to Black Vernacular English when he has a lighthearted, fun laugh with Camae. For example, after Camae gets King to say her name correctly, she tells him:

CAMAE: (*laughing too*) Right! Right! There ya go. Sound good comin' outcho mouth.

KING: A lot of things do.

CAMAE: Sho'll do.

KING: Sho'll do. (Hall 36)

In this instance, King has a moment of vulnerability in which he can code-switch and not feel the pressure to speak a so-called Standard American Vernacular English to appeal to a wide audience listening to his orations. In using Black Vernacular English, he can use this dialect without disapproving listeners lurking. Camae, on the other hand, uses the hegemonic American Vernacular English when she talks to him as an angel and needs him to understand what will happen and become of King. In a vulnerable moment, Camae begins to tell King:

CAMAE: You did what you had to do. We needed you. The world needed you.

...

CAMAE: But you didn't. You prevailed.

...

CAMAE: Powerful the man that got more done dead than alive. (74)

Code-switching too, Camae does this to indicate the solemn conversation about King's personal sacrifices he made to be able to be part of a monumental leader of the Civil Rights Movement,

and what achievements he would make posthumously. In the play, positions of power, whether one is an activist leader or an angel, power takes the form of hegemonic American Vernacular English. But in diverging from their respective English dialects, Hall uses this linguistic technique to underscore that people have power regardless of what dialect of English they use at a particular time. Hall exposes the arbitrary elements of language. While the imaginations of language historically hurt people who do not speak the so-called Standard American Vernacular English, King and Camae are used as a possibility for a world in which anyone can use the dialect of their choosing and be taken seriously regardless.

Baker-Bell also notes that “a standardized language is hypothetical and gets constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis by those in positions in power” (82). In other words, language and dialects are arbitrary and abstract, but those in power use language and dialect for their own advantage. If linguistically marginalized groups of people do not adhere to these rules made from abstract concepts, they are penalized. As I said previously, *The Mountaintop* uses King to comment on the ways in which his code-switching must happen in order for him to be taken seriously by not using Black English Vernacular in speaking to a national audience. With this statement in mind, contextualizing it in the world of *The Mountaintop* is important to understand why King would comment on Camae’s code-switching from Black Vernacular English to white hegemonic American English as a “surprise” to him. In a sermon-like speech Camae gives to an attentive King, she code switches from non-Black English to Black English. This is what she says:

CAMAE: (*with a ‘King’ voice*) Church! We have gathered here today to deal with a serious issue. It is an issue of great preponderance - you like that? - preponderance! . . . I have told you that the white man is our brother. And he

should be treated as such. . . . But it is hard to do this when our brother beats his fist upon our flesh. . . we have been drowned by hoses. Our dreams being washed away. We have been bitten by dogs. . . To this I say, my brethren, a new day is coming. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and today is the day I tell you to KILL the white man! (*Sotto voce*) But not with your hands. Not with your guns. But with your miiiind! (*Back to regular voice*). We are fighting to sit at the same counters, but *why*, my brothers and sisters? We should build our own counters. Our own restaurants. Our own neighborhoods. Our own schools. The white man ain't got nothin' I want. Fuck the white man! *Fuck* the white man! I say, FUCK 'em! (Hall 46)

Camae begins her monologue by situating herself as someone who should be listened to, hence the stage direction of the actress playing Camae to invoke a persona like King. She uses the word 'preponderance' as a way to express the pressing issues at hand in her sermon with words that white English speakers would appreciate and to ask King for the validation of said word ("you like that?") (46). Then switching the conversation from that rhetorical question, Camae mimics King's many speeches about how white folks are siblings to Black folks. In the infamous "I Have A Dream" speech, the real-life King talks about the systemic racism and inequality that Black folks suffered through up at that point in American history and the goodness that will come when people unite together to put an end to racism and inequality. To quote a little from his "I Have A Dream" speech: "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence." In other words, King here wants Black folks to be the bigger person, to not stoop to violence and hatred that plagues half a nation who perpetuates anti-Black racism.

Instead of glossing over anti-Black racism, Camae goes into detail in her own spin of a King-like sermon about the acts of violence that Black citizens in the United States have faced not just in the Civil Rights period, but of the past as well. Explicitly, she repeats Fannie Lou Hammer's phrase that she is "sick and tired of being sick and tired" (46) to pronounce how emotionally, physically, and verbally exhausted it is for Black folks to be living in a white hegemony that expects them to be docile and grateful for what they already do have. Hall includes this quote to be spoken by Camae because like Hammer, Camae wants there to be no more systemic racism and violence, no more generational trauma for Black folks and of herself. Camae rejects this ideology of not taking any action, and it is precisely when she yells out the word "KILL" that all modes of white hegemonic English crumble and she orates with a Black-centric rhetoric that demonstrates her facility at code-switching. With code-switching, she can be more impactful and honest using Black Vernacular English in ways that she could not with hegemonic American English Vernacular. Camae's suggestions at Black owned business and society, along with such strong and profane words as "kill" (46) and "fuck" (46) makes use of a more powerful method of conveying what she and other Black activists really want to say, but feel like they should not. After her faux sermon, King does agree with Camae about how to not mince and sugarcoat words to not only Black communities, but to all audiences. Hall writes this agreement ever so pointedly:

KING: 'Fuck the white man'? (*Long heavy beat.*) I likes that. I think that'll be the title of my next sermon.

CAMAE: Oooooo! Folks ain't gone know what to do with that.

KING: Amen! Fuck 'em!

CAMAE: I never thought I'd hear you say that! (47)

Not only does King agree with Camae, but he also slips into Black English, and considers the provocative phrase to be used in place of the sermon he was rehearsing in the beginning of the play. His undelivered speech “Why America is Going to Hell” made him think aloud to himself that “[white people] really gonna burn me on the cross for that one” (27), that the title alone of the sermon would cause even more controversy. What Camae suggests as a potential title for a sermon is much more explicit. King’s sermon title is more gentle, yet still offensive to the racist white hegemony. Camae’s “Fuck the White Man Title” gets to the heart of Black anger, and the title itself refusing to coddle the white hegemony. Code-switching in this sense demonstrates how emotions and words can be regulated in order to get messages across with varying levels of controversy. *The Mountaintop* suggests that Black English can facilitate meaningful conversations, and cultivate cathartic outlets for those on the margins.

The ideals of promoting Black Vernacular English within *The Mountaintop* and of my understanding of the play’s use of language as an inclusive call for resistance and coalition present themselves in Soyica Diggs Colbert’s article titled “Black Leadership at the Crossroads: Unfixing Martin Luther King Jr. in Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*.” Colbert’s interest in the play lies in the historical representations and of the historical revisionism present in Hall’s work, and the inclusion of Civil Rights activism in the play as a means of considering how audiences perceive Black activism. Colbert talks extensively about Camae and the use of her sermon speech she orates to King as I have, but designating the types of speech Camae utilizes. In regards to Camae’s speech and other speeches she delivers in *The Mountaintop*, Colbert writes that Camae

mobilizes the oral tradition to create practices that in their formal attributes call for inclusion. The conversation she has with King prompts a consideration of what types of

connections will enable a truer realization of democracy predicated not on black people approximating modes of leadership based on masculine, heterosexual norms of propriety but instead on the individual's ability to mobilize the transformative power of collectivity. (275)

In other words, Camae's sermons and oratory skills are *good* (emphasis mine) and should not be excluded from the narrative of Civil Rights because of her gender identity as a woman. *The Mountaintop* makes clear that even unknown, poor Black women such as Hammer and Camae-like women had the wisdom and eloquence to be leaders, if only others had paid more attention.

Baker-Bell reminds the reader that code-switching is often used by Black folk to move in a white hegemonic society, as they need to "speak differently" (aka not use Black Vernacular English) in order to be listened by white folk (4). In *The Mountaintop*, King confides to Camae about this. As an activist and Reverend, King had spoken a white hegemonic English in order to get the ideas he believed in heard by white Americans. Even so, he polarized the American nation. King expresses this, laminating, "[w]hite folks don't seem to want to listen . . . I'm tired of shoutin' and carryin' on" (Hall 47). It does not matter whether he uses white hegemonic English or Black English Vernacular to convey his ideas about racial equity: he still faces backlash simply because of anti-Black sentiment in 1960s America. Thus, treating Camae as if she were just more respectful in King's eyes because of her code-switching at that moment only shows his hypocrisy of assuming she cannot say the same things he feels due to their different statuses in society.

While figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others like him were at the forefront of activism and change, Black folk such as Camae were either spoken for or ignored in the fight for social and racial equity by those with more social privileges. The faces of the movement who



were hyper-visible were those with power, such as MLK, Jr. who had both the title of “Doctor” and “Reverend.” These people in power of the movements, like King, were male and belonged in the middle-class. In the debate between Camae and MLK, Jr. after she orates how she would address her concerns about anti-Black racism, she looks for affirmation and validation from him to determine how well she conveyed her thoughts.

CAMAE: Well ... tell me ... how are my ‘orational skills’ - see ye’en thank I  
knew them words - How are my *orational skills* compared to -

KING: Mine?

CAMAE: Sho.

*Beat.*

KING: I’m better.

CAMAE: Aww, really, now?

KING: You made it sound real pretty, now, but really . . . *I’m* better. Nobody can make it pretty like me. I’ve been doing this for years, darlin.’ Gonna be doin’ it till the day I die.

CAMAE: But was it good?

KING: For a woman, yes.

CAMAE: And if I was a man?

KING: Then you’d be Malcolm X. (49)

Notice that he uses the noun “woman” to mean just any woman, and does not provide an example of a woman who might be in his circle of activists or a woman outside of his circle but fighting for the same cause. Camae essentially calls for what King does in his own speeches to advance rights for Black Americans, but gets that underhanded compliment tinged with sexist

microaggressions. If Malcolm X spoke Camae's words exactly, he would be applauded. When Camae says what she needs to, her status as a woman cancels out her profound statement. Double standards are made apparent in this exchange with King and Camae. Also, Hall suggests in this verbal exchange who exactly gets to be seen and heard in that particular moment. The language use of Camae and King implies that there is value and worth in hearing more marginalized groups of people within a shared marginalized community share their frustrations and suggestions to propel the movement. There must be these dialogues in which people in the same marginalized community can call out others who may speak for them, unintentionally or not. This is precisely how Camae approaches King when he is wowed by her code-switching and how she approaches issues concerning her. Hall thus challenges the audiences to reconsider who and how marginalized voices get to speak and be heard. All the voices of the group matter, not just a prominent few people with some sort of power.

Another manner in which *The Mountaintop*'s use of language advances activist beliefs of Black racial equity is in the way in which King and Camae both view solutions for the anti-Black racism that affects them and the Black community at large. Hall sets the play after the Memphis Sanitation Strike, where two Black sanitation workers (Echol Cole and Robert Walker) were crushed to death by a faulty garbage truck due to poor working conditions. MLK Jr. held a march in Memphis on March 28, 1968 to call for action about working conditions of these sanitation workers who were Black men, but his efforts in maintaining peace and decorum quickly turned to violence, leading him to escape for his physical safety. In the early scenes of *The Mountaintop*, he expresses his disdain for people to take advantage of the chaos of protests. King says "you can't be marchin' down the street, bust into store windows, and then go get you a free color television? We're marching for a living wage ... not a damn color TV!" (42). King's stance

on peaceful means to achieve racial equity could not be maintained due to the protest turned riot, as he relies on a more gentle approach to activism.

Before he explains to Camae about the events of the Memphis Sanitation Strike, Camae makes the remark that “[w]alkin’ will only get you so far, Preacher Kang . . . it ain’t workin’” (42). The difference in how Martin Luther King Jr. and Camae view marches and demonstrations is one of mentality. He is quite determined to continue his legacy and set out what he feels like he is called out to do. Further in the play, King says “*Memphis* is just the beginning . . . I’m the leader of the movement. The head of the body” (64). He is optimistic and filled with hope for the future to fare better for Black Americans and other marginalized groups of people. But for those who feel like Camae, there should be other options to fight white supremacy. She feels like intimidation tactics should get more value and visibility in activist circles, tactics that do not adhere to extreme bodily violence nor simply marching and making speeches, as MLK Jr. has done for his career as an activist. She says herself that “Camae all about ass whippins. How about a march for ass whippins?” (45). Here, Camae supports some level of corporal punishment for white supremacists, as if they need to be punished like an unruly child. Here, Camae wants to dole back the pain and hurt white America inflicted on the Black community. She continually critiques King on how his methods for achieving racial equity have faltered as of late. The play suggests that Camae’s philosophy of “an eye for an eye” and her ideal mode of activism being physical altercations is a foreshadowing of her past. When Camae calls King as ‘Michael,’ he knows something is not right, and it turns out that Camae is secretly an angel in disguise to carry him into “The Promised Land.” As the play’s final scenes reveal, Camae’s death was at the hands of a white man who was a customer for her sex work in an alley. Camae confesses that she does not deserve to be heralded as an angel because not only has she done morally questionable

activities in her human life, she also did not forgive her murderer as she was expected to, citing that “I hated him for stealing my breath” (75). In this confiding talk, she applauds King for having “the strength to love those who could never love you back” (76). She speaks from her own truth as a moral woman, knowing that her type of activism she would partake in would be much more aggressive and explicit in meaning than King’s own. Her more physically domineering tactics stem from Camae’s sexual assault and murder of a white customer when she was a sex worker, and with the trauma of dying that way, she does not want to be hurt again. Even if she is an angel with God’s protection, she cannot just fight with words. Camae wants to fight just enough to let people know that racism and racially fueled violence will not happen under her now Divine life.

*The Mountaintop* here in this exchange highlights different narratives that Black activists had regarding how to achieve racial equity. Hall suggests in this dialogue that different experiences lead to varying approaches and strategies within a movement. It is important to note that an effective way to understand people’s opinions is to have these conversations. While some may be harder to tell than others, an open and honest dialogue about activism is central to understanding differences in opinion. With King and Camae being at opposite ends of activism philosophy, they bring together different experiences that ultimately propels the Civil Rights movement further.

Camae’s status as an outsider to activism but subscribing to more radical philosophies of Black liberation in the Civil Rights era aligns with rhetoric exemplified by the Black Panther Party, a counterargument to MLK, Jr.’s belief in nonviolent and peaceful protest. Part of her opinions of Black liberation have to do with the way she was murdered. In Adriane Lentz-Smith’s article “‘The Laws Have Hurt Me’: Violence, Violation, and Black Women’s Struggles

for Civil Rights,” she writes extensively about the sexual violence and assaults that some Black women faced at the hands of white men in positions in power, especially law enforcement and of medical professions in the Civil Rights Era. Sexual violence against Black women during Jim Crow unfortunately was a reality in order for white supremacists to maintain and uphold racial hierarchies. Putting this in succinct terms, Lentz-Smith writes that “sexualized violence stood out as a vilely efficient means of disciplining African Americans and asserting white men’s dominance. It showcased the logic of white supremacy: in a system that rested on white patriarchal power, Black women’s sexual vulnerability announced and bolstered white men’s rights and prerogatives” (45). Camae as a mortal woman had her life ended at the hands of a white client, and she cannot forgive her murderer for his transgressions. She explains her past mortal life to King in a vulnerable moment about imperfections towards the play’s end:

CAMAE: But what I’m ashamed of most is, I’ve hated. Hated myself. Sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought it was my duty. . . . What else was a poor black woman, the mule of the world, here for? . . . I saw the hell this old world had put him through. The time he saw his father hang a man. The time he saw his mother raped. I felt so sorry for him. I saw what the world had done to him, and I still couldn’t forgive. I hated him for stealing my breath. (Hall 75)

Her self-hatred stems from the fact that the internalized racism she carried as a mortal woman made her believe that her single duty in the world was to please others physically. She spent her young adult life believing so, and as a newly appointed angel of God, this role gives her the chance to begin the path of loving herself. In beginning to love herself, Camae does not want to please racist white folks. Her mentality on the matter exists between the lines in her sermon she orates to King about killing white folks “not with your hands, [nor] guns, [b]ut with your

miiiind” (46). Camae needs actions behind the words that King speaks in his demonstrations. The trauma she faced as a mortal fires her up: she wants to show King that sometimes some physical altercation is needed to ward off white supremacy via fighting. Camae’s different approach to fighting racism and systemic violence may not align with King’s peaceful protesting, but the play provides Camae to explain why her ideas for protest matter to her, and to others like her. In a society not favorable for Black women, they need to exert some form of power in revolution.

Camae’s newfound faith in Black humanity not just comes from empowering her own community, but of finding the awe in those who forgive others via King. I find that in Le’Mil L. Eiland’s thesis *Playing B(l)ack in Katori Hall’s The Mountaintop: Resistance, Space, and Epistemology* reductive in his analysis of Camae. In his Master’s thesis, he writes upon the idea of how hidden transcripts, theorized by James C. Scott in his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, work in order to reveal what is actually being said through the usage of verbal and nonverbal language to resist hegemonic structures and beliefs in society (Eiland 13). He provides many examples of hidden transcripts of Hall’s King, but does not with Camae. Eiland’s rationale for his exclusion of Camae “is that Hall does not produce hidden transcripts to advocate for Camae’s humanity” (82). However, the audience sees the humanity in Camae in one such instance when she confesses to King that “[y]ou have the biggest heart I done ever known. You have the strength to love those who could never love you back. If I had just a small fraction of the love you have for this world, then maybe, just maybe I could become half the angel you are” (Hall 76). Her humanity (or divine humanity?) in this utterance produces a hidden transcript of not being perfect as a mortal woman or a newly appointed angel. Humanity, like humans, are never perfect and fallible. Camae cannot forgive her murderer and finds it difficult that King

forgives others who hurt the Black community. However, she does commend him on finding his own strength in finding forgiveness. Camae's humanity may not be explicit, but her humanity exists when one really pays attention to what she says. Hall's dichotomy on how Black people should feel about racism and white supremacy can and should coexist, and by using Camae and King, she allows for this dialogue to happen. Camae might not mirror King's forgiveness, but that is okay. Both King and Camae listen to each other, and while they may not agree with everything, they start a conversation needed in order to build more coalition and solidarity in activism among their community.

In the historical revisionism of *The Mountaintop*, Camae's presence challenges King to consider a different perspective about activism and who gets to determine the "right" or "wrong" way to go about achieving racial equity. While he may disagree on how to achieve racial equity through action, his honesty and vulnerability come through when he agrees with Camae's sentiment of "[f]uck the white man" (46) when he tells her plainly that "[m]aybe you're right. Maybe the voice of violence is the only voice white folks'll listen to" (47). He considers this activist tactic of violence/riots, as he knows that what he is doing is losing its luster. However, King does not know that this is his final hours of his life, so he cannot know for certain what violence would do for his organized protests. Hall demonstrates this idea of conversation of activist tactics between King and Camae, two people who want to live in an anti-racist world, and their feelings towards the white hegemony.

In *The Mountaintop*, the question of whose words and actions are prioritized more are challenged and inverted through the use of Camae's status as part of the divine. Under Christianity and with the Civil Rights Movement in general, men lead their congregations and men lead activism. This belief has a hold in Western society, where society favors white,

cisgender, heterosexual men and have the most power and privilege to have and wield. In the context of *The Mountaintop*, King only has two of these privileges: he is a heterosexual, cisgender male fighting for the rights of Black folks. Before Camae's arrival, he takes center stage for a brief period in time, assuming that there will not be any other visitors to speak to him. Camae, by contrast, does not have any sort of power (at first glance, that is). She appears to be a young, working-class Black housekeeper who does not have any societal power. When she meets King in the motel room, she knows that she is in the presence of someone with a lot of prestige and influence. In the part of *The Mountaintop* where Camae and MLK, Jr. have the debate about which protest tactic to use, she brings up that she has an idea, but Camae states that "*I'm just a woman. Folk'll never listen to me*" (45). Hall comments on the lack of authority that Black women had in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Black women participated in activism and speaking about anti-Black racism, but under patriarchy, they rarely held public positions. This is such the case spoken by Karlia Nicole Brown in her article "Why Black Women Activists Stay in the Room When They Are Not Being Heard," as she states that even though Black women did engage with fundamental roles in maintaining a social justice movement, Black men lead religious and secular activist groups (3074). In Camae's declaration that she cannot be heard due to her gender identity, Hall alludes to the historical sexism that Black women experienced in the context of Civil Rights activism. Black women in this era had underrepresentation of their achievements in the Civil Rights Movement overall. Camae's anger stems not just from anti-Black racism from white folks, but from sexism perpetuated by Black men.

In *The Mountaintop*, the rather engaging conversation about how to advance the Civil Rights Movement gets paused when King begs Camae to tell God that he needs more time to do the activist plans he wants to, thus undermining Camae's own status as a Divine being who has



more authority over him. Camae's initial treatment by King stems from the Black female tradition of "othermothering," a term that Brown explains in relation to his trivial treatment of her. "Othermothering" originally stems from slavery in which Black women were united in raising their communities and making sure everyone survived and were safe in their horrid conditions (Brown 3074). This notion of caring for everyone in the Black community did not exist exclusively in domestic spaces, but in activist spaces within the intersection of religion. Brown explains that "Black churchmothers housed and fed activists, led demonstrations, raised funds, mobilized followers, and demanded equal rights during the Civil Rights Movement—all community mothering behaviors that were critical to the effectiveness and success of the movement and were viewed as acts of defiance by the white community" (3074). In this instance, othermothering was a more maternal role in fighting for Black equity. In the context of *The Mountaintop*, Camae shows King both her power and her vulnerability, which challenges him because as a man of the church, he holds some power. To have a woman (i.e. a Divine woman) be higher in status than him, makes him unsure if he should actually listen to her. (The reasoning is a mixture of disbelief that Camae is an angel along with sexism.) This is their conversation:

KING: *She* send you? You're not what I was expecting.

CAMAE: Shiiiiit, you wun't what *I* was expecting, *Preacher* Kang!

KING: Well, I'm not perfect.

CAMAE: That you ain't!

KING: Hey, hey, don't judge me, you cussin', fussin' drinkin' angel!

CAMAE: Well, God know what you like, henh!

KING: Hey, hey that ain't fair now!

CAMAE: The truth ain't gotta to be fair. It's the truth.

KING: But *why* you?

CAMAE: Believe you me I ain't want this job. First day? Bring over you? The Kang? I ain't wanna do it. But God been gettin' these prayers from a littl'un named Bunny. (Hall 59)

Not only does King get challenged by Camae's no-nonsense attitude and exerting of power (which would not happen in his congregations), but Camae gets King to come to his senses when his "Bunny" (59), or Bernice, is brought into conversation. While Camae does participate in othermothering through her actions as an angel, she certainly does not want to be perceived as dainty and soft-spoken. Camae wants to be respected in her own right as a powerful entity, and she defends herself against an initially opposed King. This specific example of othermothering that Hall includes in Camae's early angel scenes serves as Camae's refusal to be stereotyped in terms of gender and by actions.

To reiterate the context of Black women in positions in power during the Civil Rights Movement, the idea of a Black woman in a high position baffles King, and makes King at the whims of Camae, a Black woman. Camae is at the whims of God, who is too a Black woman. This is revealed when Camae corrects him with a bellowing "*She!*" (59) when he uses the wrong pronoun for God. As this night indicates, King feels baffled to say the least that God is a Black woman with Absolute authority, an authority that he challenges with anger and pomposity. He begs Camae to call God, and after a long phone conversation with Her, She hangs up on him. Exasperated at not being used to being treated like he is not the one in charge, here we see King in defeat and anguish. Camae, as one of God's messengers, tells him honestly that "She just ain't

wanna hear yo' shit. She got the right. She is God, ya know?' (70). No matter what the makeup of God is, one who adheres to the Absolute Divine must obey Them.

Camae is an angel appointed by God because God sees redemption in Camae for all of her past sins as a mortal woman. In characterizing God as a Black woman, and Camae as an angel, Hall makes the point that authority should be gender neutral. In terms of coalition building among activist groups and in general, there should be gender neutrality in positions in power, so that all genders can have a fair say. When Camae tells King about how she got to where she is now, she recalls that "I looked up and saw that She was smilin' down at me. . . . I heard her loud and clear. 'I got a special task for you and if you complete it, all your sins will be washed away.'" (76). The role of her as an angel of God baffles her to say the least, for Camae did not live a Godly life. With her death, Camae assumed she would go to Hell for her past sins. In the context of *The Mountaintop*, God is a Black woman who knows Absolutely what other Black women experience in the time of the Civil Rights Movement. They do not have high leadership positions in activist circles and they experience racism, sexism, and sexual violence. God knows that Black women do not choose to go through these oppressions, and with insinuating that God is a Black woman, Hall cultivates this solidarity between the Black female Divine and Their mortal counterparts. For the first time in Camae's existence, she is able to be in a position of high power and not be hurt anymore by racism and sexism. Returning to Colbert's article, she mentions Camae's angel status in the realm of West African religious matters. Camae is both an Angel and Legba-like, with the Legba being a trickster messenger that connects the mortal world to the Divine (273, quoted in Vega 2002: 161-62). Her qualities as an angel are deconstructed in the play. Hall's version of angels are that they were once mortal humans that have imperfections, and still have imperfections. Camae does not act like the hegemonic angel audiences normally

think about, but that is what makes them feel more real in Hall's perspective. Angels do not need to be morally "pure" in order to be seen as "good." For Hall, Camae's characterization as an angel gives her Black female empowerment, as well as characterizing God as a woman.

*The Mountaintop* here conveys the notion of men second guessing women and their right to be leaders of some fashion in the form of King and Camae, an important messenger from God, who is a Black woman. If he stuck to God's word as he thought God to be (white) and (male) all this time, he can certainly listen to God as Black and female. No matter one's gender identity, someone in a position of leadership who advances human equity and the advancement of marginalized groups should be treated with reverence and respect. Shifting from a self-centered, patriarchal mindset to a collective, gender neutral outlook, anyone can demonstrate their leadership and role in human rights. All voices and help should be recognized, no matter who does the work of propelling the movement.

*The Mountaintop* and its rich use of language and activist rhetoric demonstrate two different people that ultimately are for the cause of advancing Black American civil rights and liberties in the United States in the late 1960s. Choosing to set the play during the final hours of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life in the Lorraine Motel, the reader or viewer gets a theorized look at how a young Black working class woman revealed Divine named Camae considers Hall's version of King to listen and reflect on other voices and opinions of the Civil Rights Movement, especially of those who have even more marginalized identities within a marginalized identity. The play's inclusion of Black Vernacular English in activism along with an activist language that includes plain wording and ample use of swear words that includes not just marginalized Black men, signifies that activists do not need to look, feel, and be exactly as King was as a leader and activist. There are activists like Camae, and some that are like King and some that are not either

of them! What does matter at the end of the day is a call for inclusion and unity in social justice movements, and language can help bridge these gaps and in-group differences.

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Mother of the Blues, Matriarch of Autonomy: Ma Rainey as Author of Herself in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020)

Historically, women who exist out of the confines of their hegemonic societies are viewed as inhuman and rebellious. The more marginalized identities that a woman has, the more she finds herself working harder to thrive in a society that does not allow for the nurturing and validation of her identities. However, some women choose to actively resist being silenced and diminished by their dominant hegemonic societies. They choose to take up space physically, emotionally, and verbally. These strong-willed and opinionated women live in resistance to the patriarchy's expectations of women. When women actively resist their oppressors, they find the liberation to live on their own terms.

For women of color in the United States, fighting a white patriarchy is difficult enough, as their womanhoods are deemed "less than" because of their racial identities. In the context of this essay, Black women in early 20th century America were living under Jim Crow laws. In those days, a woman found it hard to exercise equality based on her gender identity, yet even more so if she were not white. However, inklings of empowerment took place in the 1920s, where the loosening of traditional social norms and mores began to unravel. Not every woman had this opportunity depending on her marginalized identities, but some women decided to partake in these ideas of female autonomy regardless of male opinion. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020), features a Black woman in the late 1920s who actively fights against the white hegemony and finds peace in validating who she is empowers her. Living and acting in her own self-interests and of her Black community, her role as a trailblazer and self-emancipated Black woman allows her to exist and know who her true allies are.

Ma Rainey, a Black blues singer from the early 20th century, is immortalized in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. A screen adaptation of August Wilson's 1982 Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* stars Viola Davis as Ma Rainey. To summarize the film, Rainey and her band travel to Chicago to record her music in a dingy and sweltering Paramount music studio under the authority of white racist music producers. Rainey does everything in her power to keep her music authentic and stand up to the music producers who demean Rainey and her band. Despite the music producers' pushback, she demands respect as the proud Black woman she knows she is. Her identities as a Black lesbian woman living in the early 20th century definitely did not receive the validation and approval of the white hegemony, but for Rainey, she does not exist to be powerless and devoid of empowerment. I examine her physicality, sexuality, and ideologies with the intersection of her Blackness, arguing that Rainey's self-engagement with Black female empowerment allows her to create a space for herself in a world that wants to stifle her independent spirit.

Rainey in the film demonstrates not only her popularity as a Blues artist, but of her actual physical embodiment as well. Wolfe uses Rainey's appearance to showcase how much she wants to take up space and to keep herself as metaphorically big and visible as possible. In the first scene of the film, two young Black boys run through a dark forest. At first glance, they may be running from someone or something out to harm them. They stop running when the boys reach Ma Rainey's performance venue: a performance tent accommodating herself, the band, and the audience. The camera's tracking shot glides past the boys and the other concertgoers to the performance within the tent, eventually pulling close to Rainey. Wearing a dazzling red dress accompanied by flashy jewelry and a golden headband, her presence demands the viewer to look directly at her and observe how she looks, sounds, and moves on the stage.



Historically, women were taught to be modest because of patriarchy's focus on male authority. Black women especially in the early 20th century in the United States were taught to make themselves small and to internalize both anti-Black and anti-woman sentiment. However, Rainey does not make herself small nor does she internalize oppression that a white patriarchal society wanted her to feel. This is Rainey in her element, radiating magnificence and confidence in the space of Black folks who come to see her. Rainey is a Black woman with a large body frame, and while wearing her red dress and her ornate accessories, the film wants the viewer to pay attention to her. Singing in her mesmerizing deep, projected contralto voice and moving sensually on the stage, the film wants the audience to view Rainey as a Black woman taking up space with her dancing and physical features. While the rest of the audience and the band members wear neutral clothing, Rainey's red dress and glimmering accessories take precedence visually. She is the star of the scene, the one person the audience should pay attention to the most. The audience feeds off of her physicality, cheering as she sings and moves herself in manners that excite the audience. Her bright and bedazzled appearance puts Rainey center stage in the tent concert, providing the implication that Wolfe's usage of bodily movement and physical appearance provides his version of Rainey to take a central role in her identity as a Black woman.

In Wolfe's adaptation of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Rainey just does not grace the screen and her world by taking up the space she deserves physically, but given her sexuality as a Black lesbian woman in the 1920s, she embodies a type of femininity that is quite masculine in nature through her relationship with her girlfriend Dussie Mae (Taylour Page) and through asserting her rights as a musician in the recording studio. While the film does not focus heavily on her sexuality, there is a tender and sensual moment between Rainey and Dussie Mae. While

waiting on the music producers, Dussie Mae goes up to the unplugged microphone and lip syncs to the music that is in her head, dancing flirtatiously to an interested Rainey. Then the camera shifts its point of view: instead of viewing Dussie Mae in an up close shot, the camera embodies Rainey staring at her, as the camera mimics Rainey's eyes swooping low to Dussie Mae's rocking hips and swaying bottom. In this film technique, Rainey's gaze at Dussie Mae implies that Rainey is the more dominant woman in the relationship, knowing that it is Rainey that has her world in order. This camera technique brings up the question of whether the film participated in the theory of the "male gaze," a term coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in the 1970s. Mulvey's influential piece "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" explains that historically "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (1959). To put Mulvey's quote into the context of the film, Rainey looks at Dussie Mae in a seductive manner, and the audience participates in seeing Dussie Mae in the seductive way that Rainey does. However, the gaze the camera partakes in during this intimate scene is of a Black female gaze looking at a Black woman. What makes this kind of gaze different from other gazes typically seen in film is that not only does Rainey find Dussie Mae attractive, but she absolutely adores her. Rainey wants to take care of her and give her everything she needs. Participating in a gaze reserved for men and caring for her significant other, she blends together traditional masculine and feminine gender roles to create her own kind of woman. Wolfe's inclusion of Rainey gazing at Dussie Mae seductively and showing how much she cares for her makes her the human being she already is. She knows her worth, and the film carries her expressive and sexuality as just one aspect of Rainey that exists within her inherently.

One way to theorize Rainey's sexuality in relation to her gender identity and performance can be mused upon Allison K. Hammer who authored an article titled "Just Like a Natural Man": The B. D. Styles of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith. Hammer sets out her rationale as to how these trailblazers of the genre used their sexuality and gender identities to form the prototype of what is known as the "bull dagger," a type of lesbian signifier that revels in notions of masculinity and behavior that does not fall under hegemonic norms of femininity. Using the label of bull dagger, Hammer rationalizes that for blues singers such as the real life Rainey and Bessie Smith, the descriptions of "bull dagger" allowed them to access (from the realm of blues music) "a feeling of wholeness and integrity usually only offered to White, straight men" (283). In the context of Wolfe's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Rainey's wholeness already exists from the beginning and at the conclusion of the film. The instance where she and Dussie Mae have an intimate moment together embodies the "bulldagger" identity. While Rainey's gaze may embody a more "masculine" trait of looking her love interest in a sexual manner, she gets up from her chair and pulls Dussie Mae closer, murmuring sweet nothings in her ear and kissing her neck softly. Rainey tells her that "I want you to look nice for me" and that she "knows something about bad feet" when Dussie Mae complains about her shoes pinching her. Rainey embodies the "masculine" ideal of taking care of her significant other financially, of wanting Dussie Mae to look appealing not just for her tour, but for her own personal pleasure. When Rainey comes and sits back down on the chair, Dussie Mae retrieves her slippers as she asked and she then kneels between Rainey's legs, taking off the shoes and massaging her feet. Again, the camera angle participates in this hegemonic male gaze so often reserved for men looking at women in a suggestive manner, this time with the camera as Rainey looking down to see Dussie Mae kneeling between her. The role of masculinity that the bulldagger identity resides in Rainey

provides a new gender and sexuality expression for Black women such as herself in this particular time era. Liberating to enact more masculine traits when it comes to relationships (Rainey telling Dussie Mae that she will make her “look nice” and recontextualizing the “male gaze” as a Black female gaze), Rainey’s unique femininity as mainly masculine allows her to live to her fullest potential.

The idea of the bulldagger happens when she exits out of the hotel with Dussie Mae and Rainey’s nephew, Sylvester (Dusan Brown). In a split scene moment, the band rehearses and waits on Rainey. Slow Drag (Michael Potts) reminds an ambitious and impatient Levee (played by the late Chadwick Boseman) that “[d]on’t nobody say when it comes to Ma. She gonna do what she wanna do.” The band consistently tells Levee this, as Rainey leads the band and calls the shots. In the next camera shot, the trio at the hotel gets ready to go into their automobile to drive on over to the Paramount Studio. Looking sharp and intimidating in a fancy gold day dress and a fur shawl around her neck, Rainey means business and does not want to take any negativity from anyone or anything. While the hotel is for affluent Black folks, their faces look at the trio with scorn. Exiting the building, a white man gives her a dirty look, but Rainey casually puts her hat on her head and gives him the facial expression that looks like she wants to say “deal with it.” Her confident walk with Dussie Mae and Sylvester is shown from different camera angles from the stairs of the hotel lobby all the way to the sidewalk of the hotel. In such a thematic choice of the film, Wolfe wants the audience to know that Rainey stands on her own two feet and will not let anyone tell her their opinions on how a Black woman such as herself will act. Rainey’s nonverbal cues from her facial expressions to the masculine swagger of her walk indicate that she will demand respect in a big Northern city such as Chicago. Just like how she demands respect in Georgia among Black audiences, she will do the same for white folks in the

American North. Rainey's superstardom from the South helps fuel the confidence and unabashed nature of who she is as a person. She is Ma Rainey, and she is proud. To quote the main idea Hammer explains about the identity of the bulldagger, the term itself acted as "a self-authorizing power, an artistic license that decentered heteronormative and racially constructed notions of 'family' and 'home,' apparent in the theme of travelling or being untethered from the domestic" (280). Here, Rainey is a Black lesbian woman with her non-nuclear family structure of her girlfriend and her nephew. Rainey does not have a husband and children. Despite the judgment and her existence as a pariah in the eyes of both white and Black culture, Rainey's care for Dussie Mae, Sylvester, and her band is her family. While her care may be viewed in a domestic or 'feminine sphere," Rainey's masculine nature readdresses and reconfigures a new mode of being as a Black lesbian woman.

Some audiences might find Rainey as an unapproachable woman because of how she carries herself throughout the film, and may be judged as a stereotypical "angry Black woman," which has an ugly history. In an interview with Viola Davis and other cast members, CinemaBlend's Samantha LaBat asks Davis whether or not she views Rainey as either a protagonist or an antagonist ("Ma Rainey's"). At this question, Davis explains that she does not see her as either a protagonist or an antagonist because for her, actors do not put characters in neat little boxes and play the characters as they are in the script ("Ma Rainey's"). For Rainey, Davis says seriously, she existed in a society that did not recognize her as a human being, and so she found her worth in herself and through her music; Rainey's existence is never for a negative discussion ("Ma Rainey's"). When Rainey is among her closest loved ones, of her band, of her adoring fans, Rainey's worth is reciprocated among all of these groups. But in the confines of the hot and drab recording studio (right by a factory no less), Rainey's bulldagger personality comes

at full force, fighting with every ounce of power in herself to make sure the recording process goes her way, and not of her white producers' way. In the introduction chapter of *Female Masculinity*, Judith Jack Halberstam writes that "we tend to believe that female gender deviance is much more tolerated than male gender deviance" (2530). However, depending on the intersections that a woman has, women who deviate from what constitutes "feminine" have varying degrees of consequences. When audiences see a man take charge and lead, they see the man as confident and assured. When audiences see a woman, especially a Black woman, take charge, lead, and show a wide range of emotion, then she is deemed a "threat." Rainey's music producers see her Black masculine femininity as something unwarranted because she not only takes up space physically and verbally, but she stands up for herself and her entourage at the studio.

To put Davis' thoughts in my own words, Rainey's existence in thriving as a confident, swaggering Black lesbian blues artist was the antithesis of white hegemony. They did not see Rainey as a human being and wanted to make her life as miserable as possible. In the film, Rainey expresses herself with a full range of emotions and lives her truth as a Black lesbian blues singer. Rainey made space for herself in a society deemed to make her as small as possible, and whoever came to stifle her spirit would get her iron fist of resistance. Her bulldagger identity gives her the momentum to fight for not just herself, but of her Black community.

Ma Rainey's mentality in Wolfe's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is that her music and who she is cannot be separated from her Black identity. Focusing on the scenes in the recording studio, the film demonstrates that for Rainey and her band, their white manager Irvin (Jeremy Shamos) and white record producer Mel Sturdyvant (Jonathan Coyne) do not want to have a symbiotic relationship. In a symbiotic relationship, two parties mutually contribute to a shared

goal with as much vigor and effort each party demonstrates. As much power and influence that Irvin and Sturdyvant have over Rainey and her band, Rainey pushes her white bosses to perform the song “her” way, the way that she and the band always performed: smooth and slow. She successfully pushes, sticking up for herself and her band. Initially, Irvin’s insistence on making the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” in a more up-tempo and dance hall ready beat (with manipulating Levee and his general excitement about up-tempo music) does not go well with Rainey. She tells Irvin calmly and firmly that “I don’t like to sing it that way. I’m doing it the old way. That’s why I brought my nephew in here to do the voice intro.” Not a symbiotic relationship, Rainey fights for her inclusion of Sylvester and of doing the song the way she is used to because her performance of that song is an extension of who she is. Blues in its slow, smooth format is distinctly Black and to ask Rainey to do the song “Levee’s” (the producers “way”) does a disservice to the blues as a genre and what the music means for Black folks.

Unlike her white music producers, the blues for Rainey conveys raw human emotion, of Black perseverance and musical language. Irvin and Sturdyvant cannot fully appreciate nor understand this music genre not targeted towards them. Their way of contextualizing this genre is through the use of mass production of records and following the music trends, as Irvin tries to tell her when she, Dussie Mae, and Sylvester wait for the band to finish up their rehearsal. To record the blues performances in Rainey’s way is to uphold who she is and the love and care she has for her own community. Music is part of the Black oral and aural tradition, and to alter this music for the sake of popularity and money never is a priority with Rainey. When Rainey cools off with Cutler (Colman Domingo) after a first verbal altercation with Irvin and Sturdyvant, Rainey confides in Cutler that “this be an empty world without the blues . . . I try to take that emptiness and fill it up with something.” What could Rainey mean when she says “emptiness”

and “something” in relation to the blues? She does tell him likewise that “the more music you have in the world, the fuller it is.” So that “something” Rainey refers to is music, and the “emptiness” is the feelings she has about a world determined to silence her. In this case being in the recording studio, two men who want to radically change her sound to fit younger demographics. For Rainey’s psyche, the blues is not just music that gets recorded and then listened to, but the genre is an expression of Black thought and soul.

To keep the language of the blues intact is the priority of Rainey, and for Irvin and Sturdyvant to ruin her vision of her songs is an act of anti-Blackness. April Baker-Bell’s work titled *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* discusses in length about how Black Language and symbolism gets appropriated by the (white) hegemony for capitalistic purposes in her second chapter “What’s Anti-Blackness Got To Do Wit It?” (A title nod to Tina Turner’s song “What’s Love Got To Do With It?”) Baker-Bell explains that “Black linguistic appropriation” (13) occurs through “appopriat[ion], exploitat[ion], and coloniz[ation]” (13). Black language and ideas that are taken without permission and/or some sort of mutual agreement are not appropriate. When the white hegemony appropriates and misuses Black language and ideas for their own gain, this diminishes the credibility and likability of Black folks using their own language and rhetoric to describe the world around them. While Baker-Bell’s work lies in promoting written and oral African American Vernacular/Black English, her feelings about white appropriation of Black language and semiotics extend to Wolfe’s film in regards to Rainey and her music. What Irvin and Sturdyvant want to do with Rainey’s music is to appropriate the music into a sound that does not stem from Black American culture. Irvin tries to undermine Rainey when they are about to record “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” insisting that the band does not want to have Sylvester do his spoken lines because of his stutter. She finds this



nonsense, and demands Irvin to get Sylvester a microphone so he can do the spoken introduction to the song. Irvin and Sturdyvant in this case want to take Sylvester away from doing his lines because the time spent to perfect his lines will cost more, with Irvin reminding Rainey this. Vehemently, she declares “damn the cost. You always talking about the cost” at Irvin. She knows what they are trying to do, and she will have none of their sexist actions. (Thinking they know best for her music.) Equally so, she will have none of their racist actions either. (Trying to convince Sylvester he is not capable of doing his part due to Irvin and Sturdyvant’s annoyance that the aesthetic of the song will be “ruined.”) The white music producers and their predatory behavior to control as much as they can in order to get the music to sound the least Black in blues aesthetic as possible for the biggest audience does not slide past Rainey. Their anti-Blackness not only exists in Rainey’s vision of her work, but of their general treatment of Rainey and of the band.

One of the most poignant and important lines in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* where the audience hears her mentality of self-respect happens after the initial argument after the request to get a Coca-Cola. Rainey tells Cutler honestly that “[Irvin and Sturdyvant] gonna treat me the way I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt ‘em. They back there right now calling me all kinds of names. Calling me everything but a child of God.” Rainey underscores how to Irvin and Sturdyvant, she and the band are nothing but dollar signs. Her unwillingness to ignore or tolerate the callous behavior that Irvin and Sturdyvant treat Rainey and everyone else gives her the motivation to call out their racist behaviors so she can keep her recordings the way she wants them recorded. Surrendering her authorship, and the musicians as well, to play a different version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” would be a devastating and insulting blow to each and every one of them. Yet, Rainey knows that once the recordings happen, she cannot erase them.

Rainey says to Cutler that she has been in the entertainment industry for many years, since she was a child and that “white folks try to be put out with you all the time . . . They wanna take your voice and trap it in all them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials, and then too cheap to buy you a [Coke].” Rainey wants more than a refreshing drink to combat the Chicago heat: her aggravation to not having a soft drink comes down to respect and hospitality. Light refreshments are brought to light by Rainey as she knows that Irvin and Sturdyvant want to keep the recording session as quick as possible, not taking extra moments to relax and have something to tide the musicians over. The white producers’ disrespect and purposeful oblivion of not making Rainey and her band comfortable is just one of the instances of macroaggressions present during their time together. The film review titled “The Parallel Paths of Pain and Joy” by Lex Pryor makes a point that Rainey conducts these “these . . . tests [to force] those around her to reveal their true motives and allegiances.” In other words, these “tests” of keeping Rainey’s music authentic, giving Sylvester a chance to say his lines, receiving Coca-Cola, and recording the song in her direction are traps in which Irvin and Sturdyvant fall in. These failed attempts at having an easygoing, lively recording session do not happen under a white hegemony. Including these “tests,” Wolfe shows how Rainey is smart and cunning, and knows exactly what people’s true intentions are.

Ma Rainey is proud to be who she is as a popular Black blues singer. Her anger towards a white hegemony whose reluctance to record two blues songs that cannot be removed from its Blackness is validated by Cutler especially, as he listens intently and is her right hand man. Her defiance and unwillingness to let Irvin and Sturdyvant determine who she is reminds me of Audre Lorde’s essay titled “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” from her collection of essays in *Sister Outsider*. In this pulled excerpt, Lorde writes “I can remove the source of that

pain from my enemies' arsenals. My history cannot be used to feather my enemies' arrows then, and that lessons their power over me. Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do" (146-47). Lorde refers to how internalized anti-Black racism and sexism have historically been weapons against all Black women. But in valuing who she is in her own skin and in her own gender identity, Lorde is untouchable to those who try to stop her from living a Black female life that she creates. Like Lorde, Rainey herself is a Black woman who sings the blues and is dubbed as "Mother of the Blues." She is a lesbian in a relationship with Dussie Mae. Rainey's confidence, intelligence, and shameless personality lifts her up. Her unwavering love of her Black self and of her community shows in defending herself and of the blues. Audiences who watch *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* will get a sense of how much Ma Rainey really cared about who she was and what she did for not just the blues genre, but for Black women sharing her intersecting identities.

Ma Rainey in George C. Wolfe's film adaptation of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* knew her worth and resisted white supremacy's influences of how she should feel about herself. Rainey takes up space physically where women, especially Black women, were told not to. Her sexuality in the context of a bulldagger signifies her femininity as quite masculine, and in having a relationship with Dussie Mae, she is able to navigate a relationship with her. In maintaining a mentality of self-empowerment and fighting to be seen and heard, Rainey exposes racism in Irvin and Sturdyvant for their unkind and unaccommodating ways. The film's depiction of recording her songs the way she wants them to come at a high and emotional cost. The film paints a portrait of a fierce woman who had to fight for creative control in her music not just because of how the Blues should sound like, but this is a music genre rooted in the Black American experience. She champions for Black survival in a moment in American history where

segregation and Jim Crow were everywhere. Nearly 100 years later, this film was released in the year 2020 when in the United States, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were the victims of police brutality, sparking anti-police brutality marches and demonstrations not just in the United States, but globally too. Once again, the United States had to have another discussion about how white supremacy unfortunately still exists and how to abolish systemic racism and other injustices. While this analysis of the film is certainly not a comprehensive look into the film's depiction of Rainey in her gender, sexuality, and philosophies, but in examining this from a Black feminist perspective, this essay and the film are a valuable resource in getting people to talk about Ma Rainey and her being in the film.

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