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Final Master's Portfolio

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FINAL MASTER'S PORTFOLIO

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master's of Arts in English with a Specialization in Literary and Textual Studies

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Dr. Jolie Sheffer, First Reader

Dr. William Albertini, Second Reader

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Analytical Narrative

“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.”

-Audre Lorde, Poetry is not a Luxury

“Self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin as self-neglect”

-William Shakespeare, Henry V

My first semester of graduate school began in the Fall of 2020, a few short months into the early stages of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many others, my mental health proved to be a significant challenge for me throughout my graduate career. For the longest time, I considered my sensitivity the greatest hindrance to my academic career as it often limited my ability to perform optimally. However, despite the confusion, despair, and overall dismal state of the world, I found solace in the frequent reminders from faculty and staff to prioritize the care of our mental and physical health. I distinctly remember beginning several classes with moments of silence to allow space for decompression before engaging in discussion. The practices of care I learned and experienced throughout my matriculation taught me to seek balance in honoring the fact that to be an effective scholar or instructor, I had to prioritize my own humanity and that of others. This, in turn, became the lens for my scholarly investigation. My hope is that this body of work articulates a principle that I am still learning: the most radical and powerful act any person can do is seek out and honor their most authentic self.

The first two projects featured in my portfolio came from ENG 6800: Shakespeare in Adaptation. Prior to taking the course, my knowledge of Shakespearean works was minimal. Aside from a few sonnets in undergrad, I had only attended a performance of *Twelfth Night*

(which I thoroughly enjoyed). Not only was I surprised by the depth of his work in modern society. I was particularly intrigued by the radical nature of the social commentary presented in his plays. Because of the course's rhizomatic approach to adaptation, we had a chance to explore various versions of Shakespearean plays, allowing us to better identify the essence and principal themes of each storyline.

“Woman as Bird”: J. R. Throp's *Learwife* and the Intersection of Class and Gendered Identity is the first of the two projects originating from ENG 6800. J. R. Thrope's *Learwife* was the final selection in the *King Lear* rhizome and gives voice to the queen left absent from the original tale. Characterized as Lear's parallel, Berte, the queen, proved to be a highly complex, but interesting character. During our discussion of the book, I remember many of my colleagues taking issue with Berte, the queen, for her admittedly crass and brutal behavior. I initially shared their sentiment until I realized that my issue with her characterization primarily came from her failure to fit neatly into a feminist archetype, an unfair and ingenuine way to engage in any work. Upon a second review, I found that bird imagery, as implied by her name, offered a nuanced lens for exploring the queen's complex character and nuanced understandings of gendered performance. Because I was positioning myself in the text, my scope for the draft I submitted for the course was not as clear. In revision, I tailored my focus to particular scenes featuring bird imagery and brought in feminist theories from Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig, and few others in clarifying the nuance I found in each passage.

Conjure Women, Othello's Handkerchief and Djanet Sear's *Harlem Duet* is the second project originated from ENG 6800 and comes from the Othello rhizome. This was one of my favorite rhizomes to work with as its commentary on race and race relations are so sharp and relevant. The thematic essence of the Othello imaginary really capture me in Djanet Sear's

Harlem Duet. *Harlem Duet* explores the disrupted love story of Billie and Othello over three time periods. While there were so many rich themes to explore, I focused on Othello's handkerchief and the way it centers black women and represents black love. Sear's accomplishes this by illuminating the conjure woman, or Egyptian, that gave the handkerchief to Othello's mother initially, linking Billie and Othello's mother to a long line of magic and love. In revision, I had to do some re-focusing and become more selective in my argument.

Written for ENG 4800, Thinking Beyond Binaries, the third entry of my portfolio centers on Brian Washington's *Lot*, a collection of short stories centered on the lives of queer youth of color living in Houston, Texas. "The Lord is my Shepherd" and She is Black: Queer Spirituality in Brian Washington's *Lot*. I use the short story "Shepherd" in offering a counternarrative to arguably the most pervasive argument used in the social condemnation of queerness: Queer sexuality is religiously unsound. Using a theoretical framework of Judeo-Christian scholarship offering a counternarrative to religious condemnation of queerness, I argue that "Shepherd" functions as a kind of coming-of-age story for Chris, a Black queer youth struggling to reconcile his sexuality with religious understandings of queerness. Gloria, a cousin visiting from Jamaica, serves as a Christ-like figure that helps Chris form an understanding of queer sexuality that reconciles him with his spiritual belief. Revisions for this project required a significant amount of shaping as I struggled to find ways articulate Washington's dense prose in a clear manner. This project taught me how to slow down and be concise in argument.

The final entry of my portfolio began in ACS 6800: Life Writing and Racial Memoir. "Repurposing Rage: Exploring Black Female Interiority" in Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage* came from a course offered jointly from the ACS and Ethnic studies department, Life Writing and Racial Memoir. Our investigations used critical race theory and Sidonie Smith and Julia

Watson's cumulative work *Reading Autobiography* in approaches to the social, textual, and political contexts of memoirs by writers of color. For the final project, I wrote about the relatively newly released memoir by prominent contemporary Black feminist scholar Dr. Brittney Cooper. My investigation uses Black feminist theory and Smith and Watson's text to highlight the social implications of Cooper's use of the memoir in the articulation of her politic, suggesting that the theory of dissemblance may extend to aspects of black womanhood not typically considered.

Birds of a Feather Do Not Flock Together: J. R. Thorp's *Learwife* and the Intersections of Gendered Identity

J. R. Thorp's *Learwife* functions as a sequel to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and gives voice to the queen left absent in the original tale. After fifteen years living in exile in an obscure convent, Berte, the queen, is swept into existential crisis as she begins to reimagine her personal identity in the wake of her family's death. Socially, the entirety of Berte's identity and value centers around her relation to men and reproductivity as a woman living within the patriarchal feudal system of the novel's period¹. Thus, the death of Berte's family not only renders her invaluable to the outer world, but also fundamentally disrupts the ideological foundation upon which the social notion of womanhood rests. However, Berte's consciousness, through which the novel is told, reveals a highly complicated character on account of her liminal understanding and approach to gendered performance. In many ways, Berte can be read as both an aggressive perpetuator and unconscious victim of patriarchal oppression. Interestingly, bird imagery serves as the central medium through which Berte articulates her understanding of womanhood. I argue that an analysis of the bird imagery in *Learwife* offers a nuanced and expansive framework for exploring performances of womanhood and the way intersecting power structures inevitably shape gender performance. Specifically, I identify the way the intersection of gender and patriarchy manifest in Berte's attitude about womanhood as performed by herself and other women.

As a *Learwife*, as opposed to Lear's wife, Berte's characterization is deeply reflective of the coarse, sexist and power hungry nature present in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. As a woman, however, Berte's embodiment of space-consuming, aggressive behaviors often associated with the masculine directly contends with the patriarchal requirement for docile or meek

¹ Approximately the mid-sixteenth century

performances of womanhood that shape her society. Consciously, Berte resolves this tension for herself by rejecting patriarchal notions of womanhood in embracing her masculine traits.

Consider her commentary on a failed birding attempt she witnesses at the convent “The swift’s loss is no anguish to me. I have no tenderness for small things. I was built for the broad, the outsized. My birds were bigger than Lear’s and hunted more hares...I never took a lesser portion, or let my king have higher ground” (Throp, 173) Notice that size plays a central role in Berte’s use of bird imagery here. She rejects the swift as a worthy prize on account its small size, claiming she is “built for the broad and outsized” instead. What’s more, she revels at the memory of owning larger and more skilled prey birds than Lear during her queenship. As Susan Bordo points out, size, especially that of the body, holds a direct correlation to the underlying power schema that shapes patriarchy and ideal notions of gendered performance. Just as the patriarchally ideal male body as large and muscular has a naturalizing effect on the notion of male power and dominance, slenderness as a stipulate of the patriarchally ideal woman has a naturalizing effect on notions of female inferiority in the quelling or denial of appetite (Bordo, 2246-2249). Size and appetite here are suggestive of one’s ability, the right, to claim power and space. Thus, Berte’s insistence that she is “built for the broad and outsized” rejects patriarchal notions of smallness or fragility in the embrace of her appetite for more. Her refusal to take a “lesser portion” than her king foregrounds that the nature of her appetite is one primarily driven by the acquisition of power and dominance specifically. Berte’s embrace of appetite and preference for the “broad and outsized” is not motivated by a need to subvert or work against patriarchal notions of womanhood. In contrast, Berte’s embrace of appetite and preference for the large and powerful is motivated by the internalization of the schema set forth by patriarchy.

Indeed, as opposed to a subversive or feminist gesture, Berte's embrace of masculine traits is the result of male identification, the internalization of patriarchal power schema. Kathleen Barry describes male identification as a normative state for women socialized in patriarchal culture "whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status and importance in most situations regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation. Through male identification, women automatically acknowledge men's authority, word, and actions. Interaction with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level. Rather, allegiance to men is automatic (Barry, 202). Take for example Berte's treatment of her handmaid, Ruth. In reflecting on the injustice of her exile, Berte speculates about the circumstances that led to her being accompanied in exile with her handmaid, Ruth: "Sent to court to marry a good man from the kitchens, perhaps, to be somebody's little mistress, fat as a capon. Instead she's nunneried with me! Too bad for your father's hopes, Ruth" (Thorp, 45). Notice that Berte identifies Ruth as a capon, a species of stock chicken fattened at a young age to be used for roasts in adulthood. Moreover, despite the value Ruth holds in being the queen's caretaker, Berte's sympathy in this moment lies with Ruth's father. Here, there lies a shift in consciousness regarding womanhood for Berte. A woman of her time, Berte cannot identify the ways patriarchy limits her own subjectivity beyond the ways she experiences these limitations on a visceral level. Thus, in relation to other women, she perpetuates the same limiting and oppressive notion that bind her toward other women, perhaps more vigorously.

Consider additionally the comments she makes to herself regarding the impact her choice to wear white instead of the traditional dress of black to her family's funeral mass may have on the nuns: "white is a helpful color, Lear. It marks me out, makes them see my colossal presence clearly, like a swan. While they are peahens, clustering" (Thorp, 220). Here, Berte's reference to

herself as a swan and the nuns as peahens², female peafowl, serve as rich mediums for articulating the way the Berte claims and weaponizes the power of patriarchy for her own conscious benefit here. As a bird, the swan's intelligence, aggressive action in defense of its young, and monogamous mating style is foundational to its use as symbolism for the patriarchal notions of the devoted, family-oriented woman. The peahen, however, offers significantly less privilege by patriarchal standards. Unlike the colorful and large train of its male counterpart, the peacock, peahens are smaller, gray birds with a polygynous mating style. Thus, while her personal understanding of gender performance subverts patriarchal notions of womanhood in the embrace of masculine traits, the foundation of her attitude toward the other women as inferior is ironically built on the perception of herself being closer in proximity to patriarchal desirability than the nuns. As a widow and mother, Berte acknowledges that she is at least twice as desirable and socially validated as a woman than the nuns as unwed and childless women. Berte is exhibiting what Adrienne Rich describes as "doublethink" or the way "indoctrination in male credibility and status can create synapses in thought, denial of feeling, wishful thinking, a profound sexual and intellectual confusion" for women (Rich, 1601). Despite having more in common with the nuns than not concerning status is concerned, Berte's understanding of gender as filtered through the internalization of patriarchy causes her to "doublethink", male identification limits her ability to see the largely superficial differences that lie between her and the nuns shared and visceral circumstances shaped by gendered oppression.

In effect, Berte's fixation on the masculine, particularly in regard to size and appetite as symbols of power are evidence of the ways she uses gender performance within the patriarchal

1. ² a female peafowl, having drabber colors and a shorter tail than the male.

system in which she lives to empower herself by any means necessary. In fact, Berte's understanding of gender performance illustrates "gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term strategy better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (Butler, 2551). That is, Berte's understanding and embodiment of gender performances functions as a means of survival. The moves she makes in subversion and adherence of a patriarchal system work to maximize the power, and conversely her survivability. Take for example Berte's reflection on the dovecotes of her youth, she thinks:

"hundreds of doves: the rustles and wing-beats of the dovecote, sweet crumbles of sound. High-born families kept them, in those days; it was a noble's privilege. Out of fashion, now, I think. You cannot lure a dove but must seduce it, careful, hands underneath it as if cupping milk in your palms, lulling it out of its smothered dark...Once in my early girlhood a high grille was left open in the dovecote and they flew upwards. A thrust of sound into the air, and a vanishing. I thought they would be easily lured back, would hang like white pears in the trees; instead the forest gulped them down and gave out, over days, blasted corpses. Guts in glossy mounds. Eyes stolen by rats, ants seething under a wing... Girls are fiercer birds, egg-stealers, rimmed at the eyes with bone (Throp, 127).

Note that Berte characterizes the possession of the dove as a status symbol, a reflection of a noble's privilege" and wealth. Here, the nature of the dove is symbolic of Berte's expected gender performance as the daughter of a wealthy family. Like the dove, Berte appears to understand that she is kept "out of fashion" in her inability to bring value to her family, outside of relational value, like a son. She is aware of the expectation to perform like a status symbol or

a possession, her value amounting to little more than an indication of her family's wealth. In addition to functioning as a luxury item, she is also expected to present herself as delicate and passive in nature as suggested by the seductive or gentle care with which one must handle the dove. However, the vivid detail in which Berte remembers the gruesome fate of the escaped doves suggests that this memory marked a pivotal moment in Berte's understanding of womanhood. Notice how, as a girl, Berte imagines that the escaped doves would "hang like white pears in the trees" in the ease of their return to captivity. After all, the doves likely under the best of care in the possession of the wealthy. However, she describes the doves escape as "a thrust of sound into the air, and a vanishing", suggestive of the speed with which the doves pursued freedom at the presentation of opportunity.

In continuation, the brutality of the doves' death likely foregrounded the impracticality a dove-like mode of gender performance for Berte in the exposure of the dove's relative weakness and vulnerability to the outer world. Outside of their owner's care, the dove has little chance of survival. Their domestication placing significant limitations in their pursuit of freedom. Unlike the fragility of the dove, however, Berte imagines that "Girls are fiercer birds, egg-stealers, rimmed at the eyes with bone". Here, Berte's assertion suggests that the passivity and submissiveness embodied by the dove does not reflect the strength and resilience of her conception of girlhood. Even more interesting, Berte's linkage of dove imagery with girlhood is in stark contrast to patriarchal notions of the dove as the paragon of womanhood. In effect, Berte's positions the notion of a dove-like mode of gender performativity as a doubly ineffective and inaccurate conception of the female experience altogether.

Berte's gender performance as articulated through bird imagery weaves an intricate portrait of the ways patriarchy and gender performance manifest personally and externally. Not only does bird imagery clearly identify womanhood as inherently anti-woman in the failure to acknowledge the subjectivity of actual women, it also challenges notions of authentic female subjectivity in light of the power structures that bolster notions of the "woman as bird". What's worth further exploration is the intimate role class plays in Berte's understanding of gender performance in *Learwife*. As Monique Wittig points out, the principal issue with class consciousness in a patriarchal structure lies in naturalization of male dominance through gender as a classed system itself in the power dynamic that designation of the masculine as an exclusive site of power and the feminine as inherently powerless (Wittig, 1911).

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Conjure Women, Othello's Handkerchief and Djanet Sear's *Harlem Duet*

Represented textually as a white silk cloth spotted red with strawberries, the significance of Othello's handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello* and many of its adaptations continues to be a rich source of scholarly interest. Scholars overwhelmingly argue that the handkerchief is symbolic of Desdemona's body, an approach Shakespearean scholar Ian Smith regards as "an unquestioned critical orthodoxy" in illuminating the significance of the use of black cloth in early stage performances as a semiotic representation of the black body (Smith, 2). I push the margin further in investigating the significance of Othello's handkerchief as it is represented in Djanet Sear's *Harlem Duet*. A prequel to Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Harlem Duet* centers around Billie and Othello, a black couple whose disrupted love story is depicted across three historical periods: the early 1860s, 1928 and 1996. In each continuum, Billie and Othello experience love and loss as Othello begins to fall in love with a white woman. Much of the tension in their love affair manifests through the ancestral history embodied in Othello's handkerchief. I argue that an analysis of Othello's handkerchief as it is represented in *Harlem Duet* not only centers the black women left obscure in *Othello*, but it also imbues the women with sense of power and agency in situated the handkerchief's significance in the context of conjure.

Broadly, conjure encompasses an array of healing and spiritual praxis engaged by women within the African diaspora. As an African diasporic cultural heroine, the conjure woman embodies a communal experience of survival and resistance to the inhumanity of bondage, serving the purpose of catalyzing progressive action through practices of root work, fortune-telling, and midwifery among other practices (Martin, 2). Since Othello was enslaved prior to serving in the Venetian army, it is possible that the Egyptian woman from whom Othello's mother receives the handkerchief was a conjure woman herself. Referenced epigraphically in

Harlem Duet, Othello describes the Egyptian as “a charmer and could almost read the thoughts of people...A sibyl...in her prophetic fury sewed the work” (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3.4. 57-84). Importantly, each vocational practice in conjure functions similar to a specialization. Thus, descriptions of the Egyptian woman as a “charmer” and “sybil” are suggest that she specific engaged in root work and fortune-telling, respectively. Root work is a particularly grounded spiritual specialization in the use of natural elements such as bark, herbs, and other plant forms to identify and heal the “root” cause of ailments to the natural body. Among other mediums such as teas, powders, oils, etc., these treatments can be absorbed into the skin through tinctures as applied to cloths or other modes of bodily application. Thus, the “magic in the web” of the handkerchief in *Othello* can then be understood not only as a conjured artifact, but also a treatment prescribed by the Egyptian to heal Othello’s mother.

In *Harlem Duet*, a taut line of connection is established between Billie, the Egyptian and Othello’s mother through the handkerchief as a conjured artifact. That is, for each of these women, the handkerchief serves as a cure for ailment. Consider the Egyptian’s instructions to Othello’s mother concerning the handkerchief in *Othello*: “while she kept it, ‘twould make her amiable and subdue my father entirely to her love. But if she lost it, or made a gift of it, my father’s eye should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt after new fancies. She, dying, gave it to me, And bid me, when my fate would have me wived, to give it her” (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3.4. 57-65) Note the “Egyptian’s” mandate for Othello’s mother to keep the handkerchief in her possession for its “magic” to work. That is, as long as Othello’s mother keeps the handkerchief in her possession, her lovers will “subdue entirely to her love”, she will remain “amiable” or in good spirit. However, if she “lost it, or made a gift” of the handkerchief she would be abandoned and hated by her lovers. The conditions of the handkerchief’s magic

suggest that the ailment Othello's mother is seeking treatment for is love sickness and its cure lies in the maintenance of love for the self. It is likely that his mother gave him the handkerchief on her deathbed in hopes that he would honor the Egyptian's instruction restore the handkerchief's magic in giving it to his wife. While the framing of the handkerchief as symbolic of self-love is carry forth in *Harlem Duet*, Billie's relationship to the handkerchief suggests that not only is the handkerchief symbolic of self-love, but it's magic is specific to the black woman as an artifact of conjure.

In scene one of *Harlem Duet*, Billie is suffering from intense love sickness two months after the end of her nine-year relationship with Othello. She is found by her landlord Magi and sister-in-law Amah, "Buried under that ocean of self-help books, like it's a tomb. Like a pyramid over her. Over the bed" (Sears, 290). Here, parallels can be drawn between Billie and the Egyptian woman as the tomb of "self-help books" beneath which she is buried suggests that she is engaged in finding a formal cure for the pain of their separation. Significantly, Magi reveals that she has been helping Billie form "some healing concoction": "She's got a real talent for herbs, you know. She's been sending away for ingredients – I can't even figure out what most of them are" (Sears, 291). Billie's talent for herbs suggests that she is a root worker like the Egyptian. While waiting for Billie to emerge, Amah and Magi inspect a few of the substances she has been working with for her concoction: "Saracen's Compound...Woad...Hart's tongue...Prunella vulgaris...Nux Vomica" which she warns them away from as "some of this stuff can be deadly unless mixed...or...or diluted. Some ancient Egyptian rejuvenation tonic. If it don't kill me, it'll make me brand new – or so it says" (Sears, 295) While each plant mentioned has healing properties, *Nux Vomica* specifically can be as dangerous as it is healing. Also called semen strychnos, *Nux Vomica* is a seed from the Strychnine tree whose healing

properties are achieved through dilution as its natural composition contains highly poisonous chemical properties.

Billie's use of *Nux Vomica* in her "rejuvenation tonic" becomes significant as she intends to apply the mixture to Othello's handkerchief. During heated conversations with Othello about their breakup, Othello explains his reason for marrying (Desde)Mona: "Well, she really sees me" beyond race. Billie feigns acceptance and agrees to return the handkerchief to him. Before returning the handkerchief, however, she applies the concoction she has made to it:

"(With rubber gloved hands [BILLIE] adds several drops of a violet liquid into the flask.

She picks up a large white handkerchief with pretty red strawberries embroidered on it.)

I have a plan, my love. My mate...throughout eternity. Feel what I feel. Break like I break. No more – no less...A gift for you, and your new bride. Once you gave me a handkerchief. An heirloom. This handkerchief, your mother's...given by your father. From his mother before that. So far back...And now...then...to me. It is fixed in the emotions of all your ancestors...What I add to this fully endowed cloth, will cause you such such...Wretchedness....

In this moment, Billie characterizes the handkerchief as an "heirloom" steeped in Othello's ancestral history. Significantly, Billie traces this history through the matriarchs of Othello's family, his "mother" and his father's "mother before that". What's more, despite no longer being in relationship with Othello, she also traces the handkerchief's history back to herself. The handkerchief as an ancestral heirloom suggests that its history and "magic" as a love token is situated within the specific context of an African diasporic cultural history. As aforementioned, the spiritual work of the herbalist is to find the cause of illness and heal it. Since Billie's

affliction is heartbreak, she ultimately views Othello's infidelity and unrequited love as the principal source of her pain.

By way of cure, she applies her "rejuvenation tonic" to the handkerchief, nearly poisoning herself in the process: "After several moments, BILLIE's face slowly emerges from her hands. She glares at the gloved hand incredulously, as she realizes that she has inadvertently transferred some of the potion on to her own skin" (Sears, 310). It is important to note that all of the plants Billie uses in her tonic have healing properties, except for *Nux Vomica*. Thus, the "wretchedness" Billie nearly experiences herself likely comes from an undiluted form of *Nux Vomica*. Considering that *Nux Vomica* is a seed, parallels can be drawn between its poisonous nature if left undiluted and Billie's love sickness. As clarified through the Egyptian's instructions, the handkerchief's magic only works when Othello's mother, and all the black women ancestrally connected to the cloth keep it in their care. That is, the love the handkerchief symbolizes primarily concerns the women for whom it was created. Thus, the poison produced by the undiluted *Nux Vomica* represents the imbalance in care Billie experiences during she and Othello's breakup. Thus, the magic that the handkerchief once held is now poisonous manifestation of the impact a lack of self-love can have on the owner. In Billie's case, she almost poisons herself attempting to poison Othello, her desire to cause him pain nearly rendering the same fate for herself.

The framing of the handkerchief in *Harlem Duet* in the context of conjure invites readings of the play's thematic undertones that echo back to *Othello* in interesting ways. Understanding the handkerchief as a conjure artifact meant to cure ailments regarding love within the specific context of the African Diasporic tradition not only centers the black women that craft and shape it, but also frames the story of *Othello* as one that illuminates the nature of

self-love and the consequences of the lack thereof. Future investigations could extend to investigating the significance of black feminisms embodied in conjure and the ways it could enrich notions of love displayed in *Harlem Duet* and inherent to the story of *Othello*.

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“The Lord is my Shepherd” and *She is Black: Queer Spirituality in Brian Washington’s Lot*

Growing up as a preacher’s kid, the church was a central part of my coming-of-age experience. On any given day of the week, I could be found in one of the many Baptist churches sprawled across southern Mississippi, participating in morning service, bible study, choir practice, revivals, etc. I spent every New year and many birthdays in the pew. I learned about the love of God, how Eve (women) disrupted that bond for all of mankind, and the things I should do to reconcile and maintain that relationship. This maintenance had a lot to do with being a good Christian woman: wear stockings and full-length skirts, sit like a lady (ankles crossed, knees together), and, most importantly, remembering to submit to man as he submits to God. The only issue was that, apart from God, men were of little interest to me.

Because church was such a regular part of my life, I would often doze off or find other ways to entertain myself during services. However, my attention always piqued when sermons addressed the place of homosexuality on the road to salvation. My face would grow hot with anxiety and shame as I prepared to hear, yet again, the things I mulled over every day. The thoughts I prayed fervently against every night. I would follow the speaker to the verses that confirmed that homosexuality was an abomination. I listened to the reminder that I am to deny the flesh. I cringed at the warning that there would be no place or mercy for those wretched souls in the kingdom of heaven. I took heed. I tried desperately to find ways to rid myself of my perceived affliction. My parents were persistent in guiding me toward the bible to answer my questions, unaware of how much time I spent combing every chapter and verse for some relief, a spark of change, a miracle. A miracle did happen, albeit years later, and it came in the form of distance from the noise of religion. In the silence, I was able to experience and hear all the messages of love and acceptance the church had drowned out. Embracing myself and love was

no longer synonymous with embracing damnation. I realized that the tension between my sexuality and spirituality did not need to be broken because it had never existed.

My early experience in the Black church echoes that of many of black queer folk as similar experiences are well-documented throughout Black queer studies scholarship. As scholar Terrence Dean succinctly puts it “many black queer persons tithe to keep the lights on, sit in the pews, sing in the choir stands, usher the aisles, serve on the committees, and are deacons, trustees, and members of the board” despite the misogynistic and homophobic religious messaging entrenched in the Judeo-Christian context (Dean, 21). Indeed, contrary to popular conception, the black queer experience is not divorced from the historical centrality of the Black church as an epistemological and communal hub. As a result, many black queer folks engage in a renegotiation of their ontology, epistemology, or both on their journey toward self-love and acceptance. While this process may lead some to distance themselves from the religion in crafting their own spiritual understanding, others actively challenge the incongruity of spiritual teachings and oppressive religious narratives in radically reconciliatory ways.

Historically, black queer writers in the African American literary tradition have offered revolutionary and religiously subversive depictions of queer spirituality in the Judeo-Christian context. Citing authors such as James Baldwin and Alice Walker, Marlon Moore’s *In the Life and in the Spirit : Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* offers an overview of the storytelling avenues employed by black queer writers in their offering of interventionist religious discourse. Importantly, Moore reminds us of the liberation-based theology that characterizes the Black church; resulting historically from the rejection of racist assertions used by white evangelicals in the seventeenth to late-nineteenth century that suggested Christian teaching justified the subjugation of the black community (Moore, 8). Moreover, the liberation

theology of the Black church from which black queer writers are operating within already does the work of reconciling religion with spiritual teaching in affirming that the black community, and all persons, are equally loved by God. In turn, as Dean notes, the work of black queer writers contributes to liberation theology in the ability to “hold accountable the Black Church as an institution whose purpose and mission must be love for all, regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality...able to enact a truth that demands the Black Church function as a source of hope, love, and livelihood for all” (Dean, 23).

In *Black. Queer. Southern. Women: An Oral History*, a historical and ethnographic exploration of the lives of black queer southern women, prominent black queer scholar E. Patrick Johnson notes that “Because the notion of ‘God’ was tied to a male figure or because the male leadership of the church upheld sexist interpretations of the Bible, these women sought out forms of worship that were more woman centered or turned inward to a self-discovery of a communion with a higher power.”(Johnson, 165) Importantly, the distance some black queer women take from the church has less to do with seeking more “women centered” forms of religion than it does with finding religious spaces that reinforce the spiritual understanding that “God loves all”. Because of the prevalence of unchecked sexism black women of all orientations are severely alienated from orthodox iterations of Judeo-Christianity, including the Black church. Brian Washington’s *Lot: Stories* offers a contemporary addition to this tradition with the story “Shepherd” in offering a radical exegesis that centers a black woman and black queer child alienated in the church.

More broadly, Washington’s *Lot: Stories* is a deeply intersectional exploration of the lives of primarily male queer youth of color living in Houston, Texas. Washington’s minimalistic writing style places emphasis on the mundane while simultaneously creating rich scenes that

foreground the complex sociopolitical circumstances that color each of the character's lives. The story "Shepherd", in particular, serves as an entry to alternative images of black queer spirituality. "Shepherd" follows Chris, a queer Jamaican-American boy, on his journey toward spiritual reconciliation with his sexuality. Gloria, a visiting cousin, takes an active and affirming role in Chris' journey toward self-acceptance. The density of the biblical imagery in "Shepherd" invites a reading of Gloria as a Christ-like figure. In this manner, I argue that Gloria as a Christ-like figure brings the black woman out of the margin of Judeo-Christian narrative to the center as the epitome of piety and spiritual sanctity.

One significant biblical allusion imbued in Gloria's characterization is to that of Mary Magdalene. While there is no debate over Mary Magdalene's devotion to Christ, theologians are unsure about the details surrounding Mary Magdalene's life prior to her Christian service. Scripturally, Christ heals Mary Magdalene of "seven devils" before joining the disciples on mission work. (*KJV*, Luke 8.1-2) Some biblical scholars believe the "seven devils" are a metaphor for promiscuity or prostitution. The notion that Mary Magdalene is a former prostitute is bolstered by speculation that she is the unnamed woman that infamously anoints Christ's feet with oil and washes them with her tears and loosed hair while he ate at a high-ranking member of society's home. (*KJV*, Luke 7:37-38) Based on the social mores of this time, some biblical scholars consider loosed or uncovered hair on a woman around men other than her husband indicates promiscuity or that she was a prostitute. Hence, the radicality of the unnamed woman's action. Although she is one of the lowest members of her society on account of her sex and occupation, she performs one of the boldest acts of piety in biblical history. Considering Mary's established history of Christian fidelity, some bible scholars believe the unnamed woman could have been Mary Magdalene. prostitution becomes a critical point of conjunction between

Mary Magdalene and Gloria in that it serves as a springboard for understanding critique the critique of sexist interpretations of the bible at the heart of Gloria's character.

Upon entering Chris' family home: "Gloria stopped in front of the Greco---the one where Christ's holding the cross, eyes peeled back like he's taking a piss---and when she asked my father if he'd seen the original, he stared, for a solid second, waiting for the punch line. It didn't come. He said he hadn't. It's beautiful, said Gloria, almost as pretty as Ugolino da Siena." (Washington, 47) Here, Gloria's inquiry about the original versions of these paintings establishes the connection between her character and that of Mary Magdalene's. It is important to note that many theologians laud Mary Magdalene as the embodiment of faithfulness as she was not only one of the few women that accompanied Christ on missions, but she is also a principle witness to Christ's crucifixion and the first to witness resurrection. (*KJV*, Luke 8.1-2) While the disciple Judas betrayed Christ and nearly all the other disciples wavered in their devotion, Mary Magdalene remained devoted to Christ, despite the risk of persecution. Her attendance of the crucifixion and the first to witness the resurrection as she slept outside his tomb serving as principal samples of her piousness. Gloria is positioned similarly in the text as each of the paintings Gloria's references in Chris' home depict events leading up to Christ's crucifixion. The first painting referenced is *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1580) by El Greco and the second is *The Last Supper* (1325-30) by Ugolino da Siena. In this way, Gloria as a pious and spiritual character is foregrounded. What's more, Gloria as the embodiment of spiritual love and compassion is further enriched through her and Mary Magdalene's shared past as former prostitutes.

After her country experiences an economic and social collapse³, fifteen-year-old Gloria turns to prostitution to provide for herself and family. Despite her circumstance, however, "she

³ See Clarke for more information.

found time to read---she spent some money she was saving for a lifeline on books. She hit the resorts; she discovered Milton; she worked the coast; she discovered Rimbaud, she took care of her skin; she discovered Babel” (Washington, 50) Here, the Gloria’s affinity for books illustrates a modernized version of the Christian fidelity exhibited by Mary Magdalene. For example, the first writer mentioned is English poet John Milton who is best known for the epic poem *Paradise Lost* depicting the fall of mankind in a scripturally. Here, Gloria’s discovery of Milton offers a spiritual parallel for her own “fall from grace” as the sociopolitical conditions robbed her youth and livelihood. Consequently, Gloria’s move away from more orthodox understandings of Judeo-Christianity represented by Milton turned into some skepticism of its veracity in her discovery of French poet Arthur Rimbaud whose work is expressive of his frustrations with religion. While Gloria’s spirituality is never referenced overtly, her choice of text suggests an unorthodox stance on Judeo-Christianity, privileging the spiritual essence of Christianity as a faith of love and liberty as opposed to the rigid, fundamental elements imposed by religion.

Before Gloria is introduced to narrative, she is described as a wanton and lost woman by Chris’ family. Prior Gloria’s arrival, Chris’ mother mentions that Gloria had been “(most scandalously) a prostitute, one of those women who open their legs for soursop⁴” (Washington, 44). As an adolescent, Chris is made aware of the stigma attached to Gloria’s occupation through his parents and older sister, Nikki, but had not had an experience that confirmed it to be true for himself: “I’d never in my life seen an actual whore (according to Nikki), a night worker (my father), or a calf in the wilderness (who else) (Washington,46). While each shift in language here is worthy of further analysis, I focus on the latter description of Gloria as a “calf in the

⁴ a fruit that grows abundantly in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries. Though illegal in the U.S., soursop fruit is known to have holistic health benefits.

wilderness” as it positions the Judeo-Christian imagery as the foundation for the preceding descriptors. Derived from the story of the Golden Calf ⁵, the phrase “calf in the wilderness” in the Judeo-Christian imaginary refers to a person that wanders aimlessly through the world as a result of a loss or rejection of faith. While a “calf in the wilderness” concerns the state of a person’s soul, this status is given to Gloria based solely on knowledge of her occupational role alone as the family has not yet met her in person. That is, before she makes an appearance in the narrative, she is characterized as a “whore” and lost soul by Judeo-Christian standards.

Gloria’s introduction to the narrative is shaped by this ongoing tension between stigmatized notions of the woman and the Christ-like imagery that shapes her character. While Chris is prepared to place the same judgement on Gloria, he finds that she does not fit the descriptions he has been given upon her arrival: “I looked her in the eyes for the thing that made it so; but all I saw was just some lady” (Washington, 46). In fact, his description of her bears an ethereal, yet lurid quality: “Gloria's dress glowed a shade of margarita. Her sandals smacked. You could see the tops of her ankles as she hovered toward baggage claim...Long hair. Tall heels. Ma said she was in her thirties, but I couldn’t believe it, her skin was too smooth” (Washington, 46). Notice how Gloria’s physical appearance resembles common depictions of

⁵ Exodus 32-34 (KJV)

Christ (See Figure 1).\



Figure 1. Image of Christ n.d.

Significantly, Gloria shares the same long hair, dress, and age as Christ, who is believed to have also been in his thirties at the time of crucifixion. However, Chris' note of her "tall heels" and glow as a "shade of margarita" adds a luridness to this imagery on Gloria. The differential effect created by the juxtaposition of Gloria and images of Christ illuminates the contradiction of sexist interpretations of the woman in biblical context. Common interpretations of biblical stories such as that of Samson the Great ⁶ may suggest that Christ's long hair is indicative of his power, wisdom and age. However, common interpretations of biblical stories such as that of the unnamed woman that washes Christ's feet with her hair suggests that Gloria's long hair is indicative of promiscuity and wantonness. The parallel sets the foundation for the biblical imagery that emerges in Gloria's character throughout the narrative.

Christ-like imagery serves as the foundation of Gloria's character throughout the narrative, intersecting with the prostitution in interesting ways. When Gloria arrives in the home, she requests that Chris "should sleep at the foot of her bed, or I should at least bring in a sleeping

⁶ See Judges 13-16

bag, that she wouldn't mind the company" (Washington, 52). Gloria's request is reminiscent of Matthew 19:14: "and Jesus said 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven'" implying that she welcomes Chris to be in relationship with her as Christ encourages followers of Christ to allow their children to have a personal relationship with Christ too (KJV Matt 19.14). In effect, Gloria becomes a guiding source of comfort for Chris as she offers affirming words for his identity.

This imagery comes to a head after Chris has a queer experience with a friend and is nearly consumed with guilt and shame. Frustrated with himself, Chris lashes out at Gloria by way of seeking comfort: "I said that my mother had called her a whore. A prostitute. A soursop woman. That if what my mother said was true, then the least she could do was prove it...I said the books and the trinkets and the family-my family---that she thought were her escape were no escape at all. I said she felt like she had to escape because she had no escape. I said her son was better off without her, that she was better off without a son" (Washington, 58). In this moment, the intersection of Gloria's Christ-like imagery and the sexist notion of women embodied through her work in prostitution hinge on the notion that as a Christian all one has to do is "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find" (KJV Matt. 7.7) Evidently, Chris is frustrated with praying for his queer feelings to dissipate or make sense. Notice that Chris refers to Gloria as a "soursop woman" in substitution of "prostitute". Significantly, soursop is a nutrient rich fruit that grows abundantly in the Caribbean and is said to have healing properties effective even in cases of cancer. Though Chris refers to Gloria as a soursop woman as an insult, his demand that she "prove it" echoes mirrors the spiritual notion that if one asks they are *supposed* to receive. Because he perceives that he has not received the help he has asked for , his frustration becomes nearly blasphemous as he asserts that things would be better without Gloria's, Christ's, efforts.

The juxtaposition of Christ and prostitution not only subverts the notion that the wanton woman is farthest from grace, but also offering radical commentary about notions of Christ in Judeo-Christian context.

Washington's subversion of biblically-supported notions of sexism makes radical interception regarding sexism and Judeo-Christianity. The critiques of sexism inherent in Gloria's characterization as the merging of Christ-like imagery and the stigma of prostitutions illuminate the contradictions with Judeo Christianity that are foundational to oppressive social systems. Extending investigations to explore the way the intersection of imperialism, Christianity, African diasporic religion and homosexuality merge in the tale could render additional significance to Gloria's characterization and the implications these critiques might suggest.

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Beyond the Safety of Caricature: Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage* and the Dissembled Black Female
Subject

The trope of the “angry black woman” has long denied black women the freedom to express a full range of human emotion in the public sphere without stigma. Within the Black Feminist Tradition, Audre Lorde’s canonical essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” is credited for introducing the notion that not only should black women embrace the anger they feel about the various forms of oppression they experience in their daily lives, but they should also use their anger as an effective tool for realizing and enacting radical modes of change. Lorde writes: “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. Anger is loaded with information and energy” (Lorde, 2). Indeed, when anger is distilled, it functions much like that of emotional triage, allowing one to identify areas of their being and environment that need care or change altogether. In her 2018 memoir *Eloquent Rage: How a Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Brittany Cooper uses the notion of distilled anger or *Eloquent Rage*, as she puts it, as a framework for distilling her life experiences as a self-identified Black Feminist.

Cooper opens her memoir with an anecdote about an encounter with a former student that prompted her to write her memoir. After the student, another black woman, makes a comment that Cooper’s lectures were “filled with rage. But, it was, like, the most eloquent rage ever”, Cooper remembers responding defensively. Wary of the trope of the angry black woman, Cooper insists that she was only passionate, not angry (Cooper, 3). The student, however, rejects Cooper’s response: “She fixed me with a telltale look that only another Black woman can give you, a look that said, *Girl, be for real*. And then she

said, 'Brittney, you know you're angry.' I felt exposed. I couldn't even say anything" (Cooper, 3). This moment of exposure serving as the prompting moment for Cooper is significant in light of her use of the memoir as a medium for her story. In this moment, notice how the question of Cooper's mundane expression of emotion not only triggers her into a defensive mode against the politicized trope of the angry black woman, but the mere thought that she may be angry after all leaves her speechless and feeling "exposed". In light of this, Lorde's essay "Poetry is not a Luxury" brings important clarity to the significance of Cooper's identification of this encounter as the incipience of *Eloquent Rage*.

As evidenced by Cooper's wariness of the trope of the angry black woman, even the most mundane expression of emotion can become a site of personal and political warfare for black women as she moves through a world teeming with racist, sexist, and otherwise dehumanizing interpretations of black womanhood. Not only does the weight of the various intersections of oppression within which black womanhood is situated leave little space for subjective expressions of black womanhood in the public sphere, it also has a dual, greater consequence of limiting conceptions of black women's interior selves. That is, the dehumanization of black womanhood permeates the social imagery so perniciously that it can be difficult for the black woman to develop and nurture her subjective self. For this reason, Lorde argues that "poetry is not a luxury" for black women as it the closest one comes to the distillation of experience: "It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde, 3). Indeed, engagement in poetic and other written forms that are not heavily belabored by convention can have powerful benefits for black women as they occupy space in which they can safely reflect and explore their interiority, dismantle the caricatures imposed upon them and nurture their authentic character. I argue that Cooper's *Eloquent Rage* as memoir functions as a sample of how life writing serves as a useful medium for humanizing understandings of black female interiority. Specifically, I will use memoir analysis and black

feminist thought to offer a reading of Cooper's subversion of the trope of the angry black woman as a nuanced lens for imaging public performances of black womanhood.

Identifying Subject: Black Feminist Thought and the Memoir

As a form, the memoir is a highly reflective form of biographical writing in which the writer is often centered as the primary source and subject of the work's content. Variations of the memoir include the witness narrative, a style of memoir that employs the collective-I subject to "educate and bind readers to the degree that they convince them of two things: that the story is the 'real' story of a 'real' survivor—that a narrative is joined to an embodied person; and that the reading experience constitutes a cross-cultural encounter through which readers are positioned as ethical subjects within the global imaginary of human rights advocacy" (Smith and Watson, 590). Throughout *Eloquent Rage*, Cooper uses the collective experiences of other black women in conjunction with her own. Take the opening lines of the chapter "Bag Lady" for example: "On the very day that Sandra Bland was pulled over in Waller County, Texas just a stone's throw away from the entrance to her alma mater, Prairie View A & M University, I was on an Amtrak train on a day long round trip to Harvard University. Bland, a 28-year-old Chicago resident, was completing a drive to Texas to begin her job at Prairie View" (Cooper, 99). It is possible to interpret the merges of experience present in *Eloquent Rage* as evidence of the text as a witness narrative. However, not only does the collective-I subject characteristic of the witness narrative greatly conflict with the *Eloquent Rage's* theme of centering subjective experience alongside collective experience, but it also obscures tenants of Black Feminist thought embodied in the text's formal elements.

Unlike the collective-I subject characteristic to the witness narrative, however, Cooper's use of collective experience in *Eloquent Rage* is not indicative of the memoir's subject at all.

Instead, collective storytelling in *Eloquent Rage* functions as formal evidence of the dialogical episteme central to the Black Feminist thought that heavily informs Cooper's life. Patricia Hill Collins identifies dialogic, or the principal use of personal experience in the construction of knowledge, as a core tenet of Black Feminist thought: "Even after substantial mastery of dominant epistemologies, many Black women scholars invoke our own lived experiences and those of other African American women in selecting topics for investigation" and in methodology to formally highlight the intimate relationship between the personal and political that shape black womanhood (Collins, 258). Indeed, for many black women, the oppression experienced at the intersection of anti-blackness, sexism, and classism so greatly impacts their daily lives that the mundane or personal easily becomes synonymous with the political. Thus, Cooper's use of the collective stories of other black women in concert with her own personal experience can be read as putting her experiences *in conversation* with those of other black women. That is, Cooper's incorporation of the stories of other black women functions epistemologically as opposed to offering a representation of black women collectively. Moreover, Cooper identifies herself singularly as "*a Black Feminist*" (emphasis mine) in the text's subtitle, suggesting that Cooper is the primary subject of her memoir instead of Cooper as an embodiment of black womanhood.

Regarding *Eloquent Rage's* theme of black women's subjectivity, reading the text as a witness narrative can have adverse effects on readership as it effectively blurs the line between the subject and the collective as the writer(s) become an "embodied subject". On the one hand, the notion of the author(s) as an "embodied person" or a subject whose narrative represents a collective experience can be at ideological odds with the belief that one person's experience cannot adequately speak on behalf of a collective experience. Thus, some readers may approach

the witness narrative skeptically or reduce its contents to pure subjectivity, calling the credibility of the narrative into question on account that it does not or cannot reflect a collective experience. On the other hand, readers may do the inverse in viewing the “embodied person” as the sole representation of a collective experience that can lead to a monolithic and limited conception of the collective issues the writer seeks to articulate. In either case, the nature of the collective-I subject can have an effect that can obscure the subjectivity inherent to the writer(s) in the articulation of their personal experience with the political landscape that shapes the lives of the collective more broadly. Thus, a reading of *Eloquent Rage* as a witness narrative does little in the way of humanizing conceptions of Cooper as the subject of *Eloquent Rage* n or black womanhood collectively.

The identification of Cooper as the subject of *Eloquent Rage* is important to note as a vital step toward humanizing presentations of black female interiority. In the concluding paragraphs of the first chapter, “Capital B, Capital F”⁷, Cooper foregrounds that “Black feminist rage can change this world, but it can also destroy us if we are not careful. It’s just that powerful. It’s powerful because the power of good political analysis is that it can be a masterful cloak for the emotional work we haven’t done.” (Cooper, 37) Indeed, while having an apt understanding of the heavily politicized social position of black women is vital to imagining strategies for social progression, this work must also actively humanize black womanhood in advocacy of the black woman as a subjective, human being as opposed to a mere political object. In identifying black women’s rage as a site of political analysis *and* “emotional work”, Cooper effectively broadens the potential benefits of the notion of “eloquent rage” beyond political change in positioning self-reflection as a dual and vital component of this work. Here, the use of the memoir formally embodies Cooper’s call for reconciling conceptions of the

⁷ Black Feminist

personal and political reflective of the subjective realities of black womanhood. Through this formal reconciliation, however, it becomes more evident that *Eloquent Rage* serves as a public artifact of Cooper's own "emotional work" as her keen understanding of the sociopolitical context shaping her experience as a black woman indicates a subjective being in the process of dismantling the caricatures imposed on black womanhood. A closer examination of manifestations of Cooper's subjectivity in light of Black Feminist theory offers interesting insights on the nature of black female interiority, illuminating aspects of black women's humanity that systems of oppression seek to limit and obscure.

Dissemblance, Black Female Interiority, and the Safety of Caricatures

Darlene Clark Hine's theory of dissemblance is a vital starting point for understanding the political context shaping the "emotional work" necessary black female interiority. Upon observing early twentieth century Mid-western black women conducted themselves in their daily lives, Hine coined the phrase "culture of dissemblance" to describe their elusive mode of public performance: "Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation and regional economic variations, black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of the inner aspects of their lives" (Hine, 915). Put another way, dissemblance is a non-threatening defensive mode of performance that gives black women the appearance of openness and docility while the more vulnerable aspects of their selfhood remain protected through obscurity. Hine's alternative description of dissemblance as a "cult[ture] of secrecy" is indicative of its primarily unconscious nature in function. Similar to the phrase "what one does not know cannot hurt them", dissemblance for black women denotes that what the public⁸ does not know about the inner lives of black women cannot be silenced, stolen, abused or killed. In fact, dissemblance is better

⁸ In the case of black womanhood, I mean "the public" refers to anyone outside of the self.

thought of as a culture centered on trauma response, evidence of the perpetual state of hyper-vigilance in which black women are suspended as result of the violence inherent to their sociopolitical environment.

As a trauma response, however, the culture of dissemblance has a doubly adverse effect on black female interiority. That is, despite its protective purpose, the culture of dissemblance has an effect like the systemic oppression to which it responds in the obstruction of black female interiority. One adverse effect of dissemblance operates within the public sphere. Dehumanizing caricatures of black womanhood such as the Jezebel, Mammy, and, infamously, the Angry Black Woman⁹ are entrenched in the social imaginary and precede black women in nearly every aspect of their lives. Not only do black women combat limiting and distorted conceptions of their identity in their professional and cross-cultural interactions, but they also encounter similar experiences in their private lives as their families, lovers and friends are also socialized to varying degrees by anti-black, classist, and sexist understandings of black womanhood. Take Cooper's recollection of her struggle with childhood friendships for example: "Effectively shown by most of the other Black girls who didn't yet have the tools to understand their Black-girl magic or to make space for mine, I would have no friends but for these white girls who invited me to sleepovers, pool parties, and the movies. But so much of what it meant to be a Black girl among white girls was to be a spectator and coconspirator in their construction of me as the other, as not quite like them" (Cooper, 50). Significantly, the root of young Cooper's difficulty in forming platonic relationships with either group of girls lies in her perceived failure

⁹ See *West* for more information.

to uphold a recognizable performance of black girlhood, of caricature, in the presentation of herself as a subject.

Unfortunately, black girlhood is riddled with experiences like the one Cooper describes in which the presentation of their subjective self is met with rejection and alienated by the outer world. Herein lies the other, more concerning, adverse consequence of the culture of dissemblance as it impacts black women's interior lives. The culmination of this experience initiates the black female subject into the culture of dissemblance as she learns that showing up as her authentic self is not only unsafe, but also unacceptable as her failure to perform preconceived notions of what it means to be black and female renders her imperceptible, a socially foreign object to the outer world. Because the social position of the black female subject is ubiquitously limited by intersections of oppression, much of this is experienced unconsciously as the imposition of oppressive forces are naturalized through their frequent occurrence in mundane life. Thus, as Cooper notes, an emotional skillset or outlet is vital to the nurturement and illumination of black female interiority, however, emotional work requires a level of safety made nearly inaccessible to black women by their sociopolitical environment. Thus, dissemblance, the projection of a façade that shields her authentic self, becomes safer and more acceptable for the black female subject as she effectively caricaturizes herself out of protection. Dissemblance in the absence of emotional work, however, doubly limits manifestations of the black female subject in their interior *and* public lives. Left unchecked, the façades created through dissemblance can reinforce dehumanizing notions of the black woman as the caricature she assumes to be legible is internalized in the stead of authentic character.

Cooper as a Dissembling Subject

Because of the adverse impact dissemblance can have on black women's interiority, it is useful to consider manifestations of black female interiority in terms of dissembled subjectivity, acknowledgement of the duality present in public manifestations of black womanhood. For example, consider the title of Cooper's memoir: "Eloquent Rage: How a Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower". Considering the notion of dissembled subjectivity, Cooper's identity is encompassed by two caricatures of black womanhood here: The "Black Feminist" and a subverted form of the "Angry Black Woman" as embodied in the notion of "eloquent rage". As aforementioned, dissemblance involves a projected, caricatured version of the self that shields a true, authentic version of selfhood. Because of the intimate and reflective nature of the memoir as a form, Cooper's duality as a dissembled subject is made evident through her identification as a "Black Feminist". It seems that Cooper understands her projected, caricatured self as the "Angry Black Woman", a notion she subverts through eloquence or using her rage as a explorative interestingly centers her subjective identity in Eloquent Rage around her political ideology as

"Are Black girls ever worth fighting for? I wonder this sometimes as a feminist who still secretly hopes for a man who will fight for her honor. I wondered this, more specifically, as a fat feminist who has been in one too many rooms where brothers have gone on the attack, misreading my large body as unduly aggressive, often resorting to using their own bodies as physical intimidation, only to have other men in the room do and say nothing. It has never been fully clear to me whether I was left on my own out of resentment, passivity, or some twisted belief that it would be sexist to stand up for a feminist, especially a physically large one who seems infinitely capable of defending herself. I

have learned to defend myself because I've never been able to rely on a man to do it for me. That doesn't mean I've never wanted a man to do it for me” (Cooper, 83-4)

Notice the tension between Cooper’s expression of a particularly deep emotion and the stark prevalence of her identification as a “feminist”. Granted, Cooper’s identification as a “Black Feminist” can be read as functioning similar to collective storytelling in the text in articulating the intimate relationship between the personal and political. However, Cooper significantly shifts language when she begins to discuss intimate forms of emotions. Although she is discussing the pain of abandonment, she identifies herself twice with the caricature of “feminist”, distancing her subject self from the vulnerability of emotion.

Consider additionally the personal anecdote Cooper shares in “Bag Lady” about a time she dealt with a break-up with a high school sweetheart just moments before delivering a speech:

“About one hour before I arrived, I sent my last curse-filled text to my ex, an equally curse-filled text to my homegirl, who had been offering sympathy, outrage, and possible revenge plots throughout the entire scenario, and then tried to calm my spirit and plaster a smile on my face so I could go explain to this group of eager students the intersectional conundrums that shaped my regular Black-girl life. I couldn’t fall apart like I wanted to because, well, I’m a Black girl and we don’t get the luxury of doing frivolous shit like that. This was an invitation to speak at Harvard, after all.” (Cooper, 100-101)

In this moment, note how much descriptive space Cooper gives to her own personal experience before moving on to discuss the collective nature of “regular Black-girl life”. Cooper’s description of her own experience is captured in just one sentence and imbued with enough detail to illustrate that as a person that lives a “Black-girl life”, “we don’t [emphasis on *she* doesn’t] get

the luxury of doing frivolous shit like that” or being emotional. Nonetheless, her mentioning of sending “curse-filled” messages to her ex-lover and close friend just an hour before speaking at a prestigious academic institution implies a highly emotional state of being. The concision in her description mirrors the severity of suppressed emotion involved in Cooper’s recollection of the occasion. To foreground that her experience was more than an isolated instance of circumstance, Cooper’s anecdote is succeeded by a brief articulation of Hine’s theory of dissemblance: “Black women’s historian Darlene Clark Hine coined a term for the performance I was putting on. She called it the ‘culture of dissemblance,’ this enigmatic way that Black women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries moved through the world, often doing the race work of the type I was doing that day, giving the appearance of being open while fully obscuring the operations of their inner lives from public view” (Cooper, 101). Because her memoir functions as vehicle for articulating the personal experience that shape her black feminist politics, references to personal experience here appears contrived and highly thesis driven. However, to evoke my earlier claim that politics and the personal must be handled with nuance in understanding black female interiority, it is important to note the ways Cooper, perhaps unintentionally, illustrates how deeply the culture of dissemblance permeates the inner lives of black women in this moment.

To understand the depth of emotional suppression involved in Cooper’s articulation of her own memories of dissembling, it is useful to consider the nuance of her references to black girlhood/womanhood in this passage. The infantilization of black adults and adultification of black children is a cultural phenomenon deeply seated in anti-black racism. In “Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tail: The Infantilization and Hyper-Sexualization of African American Females in Popular Culture”, Sika Dagbovie-Mullins elaborates on the stifling ways this racist

trope imposes on Black womanhood: “The dangerous entangling of woman and girl prompts us to think about black girls in two interrelated and degrading ways: they are forgettable and invisible and yet highly visible, hypersexual, and repelling” (Dagbovie-Mullins, 749). Indeed, many studies on black female youth find that the “superwoman” or “strong black woman” trope acts as their first line of dissemblance as they make the transition from the expectation of competency imposed on them as children to be presumed incompetent as adults.

In a study on college black women, researcher Martinique Jones and colleagues researched responses in defining what the trope of the “Strong Black woman”: “The emotional paradox for Black women is highlighted when they juxtapose other’s perceptions of strong Black women as Angry with their personal attribution of Emotionally Contained. In pairing these two themes together, it may be that many Black women understand that only their emotional expressions of anger are recognized and are negatively perceived by others. As such, they may minimize displays of affect or engage in self-silencing” (Jones et. al, 355). Notice how Cooper’s description of heartbreak mirrors the kind “emotional-containment” or display of “self-silencing” found in this study. Along with anger, Cooper’s break-up likely evolved a great deal of sadness and grief as she ended a relationship with someone she has known since high school. However, quelled rage is the only emotion that manifests in itself outwardly through “curse-filled texts” in her description of this moment. In reference to the thought of “falling apart” or giving into more vulnerable emotions, Cooper evokes “Black girlhood” specifically in explaining her inability to engage or express a fuller range of emotion in the moment and in writing. As the study points out, “it may be that many black women understand that only their emotional expressions of anger are recognized and are negatively perceived by others

Of all the caricatures of black womanhood, the trope of the angry black woman and its subverted usage as a caricature is central to exploration of black female interiority in the context of the culture of dissemblance. As the trope of the angry black woman suggests, black women are not allowed to be angry in the most organic sense as anti-black notions of savagery and violence render the emotion threatening and sexist notions of the woman as docile trivializes it as mere drama. However, anger as an emotion derivative of the negation of more vulnerable emotions like pain or sadness in outward expression. It is useful, then, to consider the trope of the angry black woman in light of anger as an emotive form of dissemblance. Just as dissemblance gives black women the *appearance* of openness, being non-threatening, while remaining guarded for the sake of protection, the expression of anger allows black women a way to *be open* about things that make them sad or hurt while protecting their more vulnerable feelings from further harm with the prickly hostility and distance demanded by expressions of anger. The notion of “eloquent rage” becomes a way for black women to cultivate the only legible form of emotional expression that allows them to maintain its protective qualities while importing the necessity of shifting the political landscape to create more room for their own subjectivity.

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