THE REVOLUTION WILL BE EMBODIED: AN ARCHIVAL MEDITATION ON THE CORPOREAL NARRATIVES OF BLACK FEMMES AND THE SOMATICS OF JOY AND PLEASURE (1930S TO 1980S)

by

SHA'MIRA DEANNE COVINGTON

(Under the Direction of KATALIN MEDVEDEV)

ABSTRACT

As a result of inscriptions informed by slavery and colonialist ideology, the Black femme body bears dialectic narratives of unfeminine and asexual with exotic and hypersexual, limiting its liberatory potential in the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. In an attempt to rewrite and reimagine Black femme embodied narratives, this dissertation calls for a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing framework to analyze Black women's archival imagery. More importantly, the dissertation highlights three case studies, Katherine Dunham, Angela Davis, and Grace Jones, to evaluate how those who self-identify as Black women/femmes use their bodies, and the many uses of their bodies whether dress, movement, expression and more, to enact resistance and liberation. The analysis attempts to resist the violent historical narratives inscribed onto Black femme bodies to give articulation and set free the limiting binary of Black women's identity and thus their embodied liberatory practices. By extending and interrogating mainstream readings of Black femme archival imagery, the study elucidates a new praxis of Black femme liberation, one that highlights the somatics of joy and pleasure. The analysis illuminates how embodied interventions might form their own theoretical framework for Black

feminist-womanist and decolonizing thought and for reclaiming Black femme humanity from the typologies that have so structured Black women/femmes/gender expansive people in the past and present. The study finds that Black femme liberation is a spiritual, mental, and embodied experience.

INDEX WORDS: Embodiment, Archival Research, Black Feminism, Womanism, Decolonization, Somatics, Katherine Dunham, Angela Davis, Grace Jones

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DEDICATION

“Are you doin’ this work to facilitate growth or to become famous?

Which is more important?

Getting or letting go?”

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All praise is due to God, Spirit, and my ancestors for seeing and guiding me through the Ph.D. and dissertation process. It was an unnecessarily oppressive and burdensome endeavor, but I made it!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Embodiment remains an undervalued and understudied topic although it is an important aspect of every society and culture. We all have bodies, and we are always moving, even if that movement is simply breathing. Our movement and bodies communicate everything that we are. They reflect our moods, our personalities, our histories, our families, and our cultures. Therefore, if we are alive, we are embodied. Oftentimes, our bodies and movements communicate significantly more than our words. This is true for us, as Black[1] people, who have suffered abuse from governments, institutions, cultural practices, and individuals. For centuries, dominant narratives, typically in the name of white supremacy, have worked tirelessly to subjugate, and silence Black intellect, politics, and activism. Because of this, we have always used our bodies to indicate our location in society and our attitudes about that location. But how do we read Black embodiment? The relationship between a narrative and the body is often problematic. The narratives about Black bodies are typically told through the lenses of imperialism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. The narratives about Black women's bodies are told through the same lenses with additional layers of heteropatriarchy, misogynoir, and necropolitics. How can we read Black women's embodiment despite these manifestations of Black subjugation? I posit that

[1] I capitalize Black to follow the lead of many historical Black and anti-racist writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde, and Tema Okun. I choose to capitalize *'Black'* when referring to Black people and lower case *'white'* when referring to white groups to center the leadership, authority, and ways of knowing of the group of marginalized people to which I belong. I believe that calls for equal treatment of the terms *'Black'* and *'white'* in writing only further whitewashes inequalities and supports the idea of color blindness that does not yet exist in society (Kapitan, 2016). Capitalizing 'Black' is a part of my decolonizing agenda.

a decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist[2] emphasis on our corporeal, nonverbal worlds of experience proposes an invigorated conception of Black liberation.

There are many approaches and practices that help us find harmonious relationships with our embodied selves. Some include adornment processes and movement. For example, in-depth explorations of the culture and history of style and dress in the Black diaspora have revealed that Black individuals and groups have conveyed their occupations, politics, religions, and lives through the creative styling of their bodies (Ford, 2015; Ford, 2019, Kelley, 1997; Khabeer, 2016; Miller, 2009; Tulloch, 2016; Walker, 2017). Black dress, as an embodied practice, has been and can be used as an empowering tool. Similarly, studies have shown that dance movements may open sites of resignification and resistance for Black individuals and communities (Bristol, 2015; Emery, 1988; Hall, 2012; King-Dorset, 2008; Luckett, Weems, Gillespie, Byrd, & Johnson, 2019; Roberts, 2021). Dance offers an individual and collective embodied process of resisting racial oppression and power abuse. Even subtle movements have been included in embodiment research such as sociology's "cool pose" which describes a fearless style of walking, an aloof facial expression, and the clothes a Black person may wear to appear in control (Majors, 1992). Research in somatics, the study of the body perceived from within (Hanna, 1988), has included yoga practice as a complex cultural phenomenon that is indicative of the racial, economic, gendered, and sexual politics of the body. Studies have shown that despite the exclusionary nature of western yoga, Black people have practiced and continue

[2] For the purposes of this dissertation, I want to state that I favor the term womanism over Black feminism because I believe that mainstream connotations of "feminism" is inadequate to address Black women's issues. The term "feminist" is associated with the mainstream women's right's movement, which centers white women. White women have routinely enacted violence against Black women and because of this, I believe that Black women's liberation remains outside of the interests of and will take place despite white conceptions of mainstream feminism. However, I am indebted to Black women and scholars who refer to themselves as Black feminists and so I honor both academic terms in my writing because of my hesitation to divide Black women's collective sociopolitical, intellectual, and spiritual work.

to engage in yoga practice to reaffirm Black worth (Berger, 2018), manage poverty-induced stress, for personal well-being (Giambrone, Cook, & Klein, 2018), and to demonstrate that Black physical and emotional wellness is political (Evans, 2021). While there is literature that indicates that Black people have used various corporeal practices for resistance, the above studies rarely combine embodied modalities or attend to the specific narratives of political refusal, of not just the body, but resistance connected to the mind and spirit.

This dissertation emerges from my love of Black cultural production discourses and Black embodiment. My interest lies in the connection of embodiment and the liberation of Black women with a focus on joy and pleasure. I am intrigued by the different possibilities of the body as a tool for intervention and resistance despite the violence it has endured under imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and other global forms of domination. My work aims to highlight the embodied modes by which Black women disrupt the distortions of who they are that have been fabricated by hegemonic institutions. I ask, how might Black femme embodiment further the project towards liberation? In honor of one of my idols, Dr. Jessica Marie Johnson, I use Black femme here to refuse biology and the binary. Femme embraces the feminine, the woman, the perseverance of Black women to exist as an act of defiance and of decolonizing gender. I acknowledge and realize the difficult process of decolonizing the gender binary. In my process of (un)learning, for now, I continue to use both terms, women, and femmes.

Using the story of my embodiment as a reference, I connect the process of dressing the body with what I refer to, as the somatics of joy and pleasure for a type of liberation. My understanding of liberation comes from yogic and Black liberation philosophy. In yogic philosophy, liberation is the transcendence of the consciousness from the body and/or world (Prakash Arya, 2005). In Black liberation philosophy, liberation is the evolution of the mind,

heart, and spirit (Shakur, 2010). Liberation, in various marginalized majority-world settings, is a resource to rethink conventional western scientific conventions of what it means to be liberated. Because people can and do enact resistance through their bodies, liberation can include critical consciousness and/or empowerment from their lived experiences within complex social matrices of power, privilege, and oppression (Almeida, 2018). When engaging in a process of decolonization, liberation does not necessarily mean access to finances, national and global markets, and various economies, and/or politics, as these may limit the liberatory potential of Black bodies in a violent neocolonial state. For the purposes of this dissertation, liberation refers to the embodied freedom from social and political systems of oppression, to be, live, and thrive despite these systems.

Positionality

My journey as a scholar has led me to investigate the corporeal narratives of Black women. My research process began as a critique of the fashion industry's use of Black "political" subjects, such as Colin Kaepernick in Nike's marketing and advertising campaigns. However, the more I analyzed fashion advertising, the more I began to question what it means to (re)configure and perform Black embodiment and liberation under capitalism. I realized that as Black likeness, struggle, and culture are appropriated, assimilated, and commodified, the more distant the cultural contribution to global discourses of liberation have become. If we view Black embodiment through the lens of capitalist industries, we lose the understanding of the potential of embodiment and liberation. I became interested in how Black women have historically negotiated living, working, and being in an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2000; 2004) through embodied interventions of joy and pleasure.

I refer to this dissertation as a meditation because it serves as my contemplation and reflection of how I, a Black woman, might be liberated in my current world. I have felt confined in one way or another, most of my life; most recently bound by the legacies of oppression in academia as a doctoral student. Racist, sexist, and classist ideology and institutional practices have plagued my experiences as a Black, first-generation graduate student at a predominately white institution. These have greatly contributed to race-based traumatic stress and to cope with it I have sought therapy. Additionally, during the four years of my studies, I experienced profound trauma and grief. A year into my program, my brother-in-law was murdered. He became a victim of gun violence. At the time of writing this dissertation, my family is still seeking justice and restoration for his loss and grappling with the traumatic experience. A year later, my mother suffered a brain aneurysm which left her in a coma for two weeks and led to the loss of her memory. The event was a profound rupture to my family structure and my mother will never fully recover. These events, compounded with general suffering in the world, and my own mental health, lead me to Buddhism, yogic practice, therapy, and solitude. The archives became my respite and enjoying the beautiful imagery of Black women in them. I have never felt freer. My experiences in unfair and unjust, yet thriving systems, have convinced me that there must be *something* that differs from and even transcends "traditional" material liberation. This is not to say that material liberation is not necessary. However, my scholarly interest lies more in exploring how the corporeal, the spiritual, and the somatic intersect in the project toward liberation. History has proven that material liberation alone is inefficient to improve Black life (Hartman, 1997). While it is essential, it is not enough, which has convinced me that we, Black subjects, must engage in mental and spiritual liberation steeped in joy and pleasure. The

embodied liberation that I explore in this study through my case studies is what makes the study novel in the fashion discipline.

Significance of the Study

Scholars have largely ignored the influence of the process of commodification of Black people and its intersections with pop culture. Social science scholarship on Black people analyzes Black capitalism (Cross, 1969), discusses the profitability of Blackness (Walker, 2000), and dissects racist discriminatory practices (Pittman, 2020). At the same time, the mind, body, spirit connection of Black experience under capitalism is often ignored, especially in the fashion discipline. Qualitative researchers often engage with the mind, and, peripherally, with the body as well, but scant attention is given to the spirit, ignoring the complex role that Black women's inner lives play in liberation from oppression. In this study, I bridge this gap by discussing the continued legacy of the exploitation of Black women and highlighting examples of Black women's liberatory praxis despite exploitation.

I explore three case studies, Katherine Dunham, Angela Davis, and Grace Jones. I focus on these three femmes to connect my own liberatory praxis with that of Black women/femmes. I selected Katherine Dunham because she is the matriarch of Black dance and as a student of dance, I have always watched her proteges. As an adult, I have also used dance as a practice to escape from reality, rest, and be with myself. I selected Angela Davis because, since my childhood, she has been the symbol of Black womanhood and collective care. She was the first Black woman academic that I knew of, and her 60s and 70s aesthetic and politics inspired me to imagine a better and liberated world. When I started my natural hair journey in high school, my grandmother joked that I was becoming Angela Davis and that stuck with me. I selected Grace

Jones because I distinctly remember watching the movie *Boomerang*, at my grandmother's house and thinking "SHE is fashion". Her spirit reminded me of the Black women that raised me.

The selected Black women all come from my experiencing a form of wholeness. Black feminist, womanist, and decolonizing scholars center research as academic, political, and spiritual endeavors that necessitate an ethical practice of acknowledging the self as integral to inquiry. Thus, my approach of selecting the case studies articulates new questions of qualitative research in the fashion discipline that centers personhood, spirit, and Blackness.

I acknowledge and name the limits of my interest in the type of liberation I outline for myself and the women/femmes I analyze. It seems to me, though, that just the materiality of existence doesn't account for the vastness of Black liberation. It does not go beyond human imagination, while Black liberation *must* go beyond it. The concept of a Black liberation that relies on the body and goes beyond the material is normative in Black Studies. In Afrofuturism, for example, the body plays a role in enacting a vision of Black futurity and liberation (Batiste, 2019) while relying on spiritual, emotional, physical, and/or intellectual tools constructed by the African diaspora. Afrofuturism is a way of looking at the world and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens that reimagines the Black experience using technology, science fiction, and fantasy (Dery, 2008). One of those technologies is the ability to "realize" or "actualize" one's inner liberation despite otherwise materially oppressive circumstances. Thus, the analysis I propose offers an important companion to material liberation by examining how embodied interventions might form their own theoretical framework for Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing thought in reclaiming Black femme humanity and liberation.

Research Questions

In this dissertation, I engage with two overarching research questions: (1) What do the selected Black women reveal about embodied liberation? and (2) what is revealed by a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing analysis of Black women's imagery? Through these questions, my goal is to uncover and reclaim the socio-political and cultural contributions and collective spiritual and political memories of selected Black women who utilized their bodies, in various ways, to experience joy and pleasure, and, by doing so, ultimately, liberation. My hope is that this study informs how visual analysis can inform liberation projects.

For practicality, I focus on the period from the 1930s to the 1980s. The Harlem Renaissance or the "New Negro Movement" of the 1920s and 1930s is lauded as the intellectual and cultural revival of Black music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater, and politics (Collins & Crawford, 2006). Although it was centered in Harlem, New York, it was heavily influenced by the Black Southern U.S., Africa, the Caribbean, and Black communities living in Europe. Because the Harlem Renaissance is recognized as a major transnational Black intellectual revival, it should be considered a period of culturally and historically significant multimedia assets. That means, there is much to uncover in the archives from the Harlem Renaissance Era. Next, I reference the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. The movement legally broke the pattern of racial segregation and achieved the most important breakthrough in equal-rights legislation for Black Americans since the Reconstruction period (1865–77). Lastly, I take the 1970s and 80s into consideration as mass commercialization and popular culture became more prevalent.

I focus on three case studies, Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), Angela Davis (1944-present), and Grace Jones (1948-present), through archival materials. In conducting archival

research, I am conscious of the historical violence that the archive has inflicted on Black women and attempt to redress it. Because the people who work in and with archives have, historically, been white; the archives are built by and upon whiteness (Gilliland, 2011; Bowers, Crow, & Keeran, 2017; Husdon, 2017). As a result, the true experiences of Black people (and other POC) have largely been erased both in the archives and in the arguments that are made from evidence gathered from the archives. Using a decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist methodology, I approach archival imagery with a reparative aim.

Structure

First, I provide a summary of the critical background to my working conceptualization of embodiment to explain the theories and concepts that inform my archival analyses that follow. My understanding of embodiment comes from the work of sociologist Joanne Entwistle and Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers. However, I also engage with the theoretical context in which other scholars and practitioners are in dialogue with embodiment and liberation such as womanist Layli Maparyan (2006; 2011), Black feminist and historian Jessica Johnson (2020), dress historian Tanisha Ford (2016; 2019), dance scholar Rosemarie Roberts (2013; 2021), and intellectual historian Stephanie Evans (2021). I then briefly explain the current exploitation of embodiment practices for capital gain in the music industry and wellness industries that intersect with the fashion-industrial complex. I argue that forms of embodiment exploitation are neither sustainable nor liberatory as colorblind neoliberal marketing and advertising would have audiences believe. I suggest that embodied practices are rituals and sacraments in liberation but the industries that exploit them view them as commodity, which does nothing to further individual or collective liberation, Black or otherwise. Next, I use decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist methodologies to explore various archival depositories to uncover and reclaim

the socio-political and cultural contributions and collective spiritual and political memories of Black women who have utilized their bodies for liberation. Although my main source is visual imagery, I examine a variety of data sources to contextualize the photos including biographies, film, historical documents, public records, and personal papers as means by which Black women produce a critique of the ways in which hegemonic discourses have oppressed them. My research concludes that Black women have used their bodies and the somatics of joy and pleasure as a tool for socio-political intervention and to critique anti-Black capitalist rhetoric while also liberating themselves mentally and spiritually.

Definitions of Key Terms

Embodiment

Embodiment is "the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body" (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 3). Embodiment signals the idea that there is a constitutive relationship of the lived body to thought, knowledge, and ethics, taking leave of the male dominated idea that bodies can be left behind as the mind does its work. It also refers to cultural practices and social situations experienced primarily through the body (Turner, 1995). Feminists (Bordo, 2004) suggest that cultural ideals of women are imprinted on the body and suggest that women often use their bodies to guide them through certain social processes. Embodied practices are tools for self-exploration, self-awareness, and self-acceptance (Ford, 2016; Tylka & Wood Barcalow, 2015). Psychologists, Körner, Topolinski, and Strack (2015) define embodiment as an effect where "the body, its sensorimotor state, its morphology, or its mental representation play an instrumental role in information processing" (p. 1). This definition suggests that information processing or knowledge is to some degree, based on the body. We all process information differently based on our bodily

experiences. Bodily oppression, dominance, and trauma in society impact our experiences of embodiment. Caldwell and Johnson (2012) point out that the experience of embodiment to those who are marginalized and alienated from the dominant society can also be the source of liberation and empowerment. I investigate the significance of embodiment through exploring the oppression of and dominance over the body with the somatics of joy and pleasure. I investigate the duality of the body as a site of oppression and, simultaneously, as a source of power steeped in joy and pleasure. Both dominance and oppression are leveled on and communicated through our bodies, therefore, I use the term embodiment to describe how systems of dominance and oppression can be transformed through our bodies.

Black Femme

The word femme is French and translates to "woman." The term is also used to describe a lesbian who exhibits a feminine identity or gender expression (Hoskin, 2021). Femme, unarguably, has queer roots in its contemporary use. Across queer cultures, femme is understood as a mode of interpreting femininity queerly (Schwartz, 2020). To queer something means to consider or interpret it from a perspective that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Femme identity is also understood as a source of empowerment or healing, especially for women who have experienced sexual trauma or have been forced to repress their (queer) sexual appetite under heteropatriarchal rule (Hemming, 2021). In Black feminism, Black femme praxis is a generative configuration of social, political, and psyche/spiritual sway. Both Blackness and gender shape the use of "Black femme." Because of the unique experiences of Black women in the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, which I expand upon later, there is a complicated intersection between Black womanhood, the performance of femininity, cis and/or queer, and the erotic. Thus, Black femme

identity has been defined and embodied by many as an identity with Black feminist roots and revolutionary potentials (Lorde, 1984; Madhubuti, 2005; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2012). Black femmes are queer, trans, and cis Black women who build resources and solidarity amongst us in a society that denies us humanity. My use of Black femme nods to the historical ungendering of Black women, a reclamation of femininity (cis or queer), and aims to decolonize and queer the gender binary. At times, I use Black woman and Black femme interchangeably with the understanding that my purpose is to acknowledge and question white heteronormative conceptions of Black womanhood.

Somatics of Joy and Pleasure

Somatics emphasizes internal perceptions of the body (Hanna, 1988). Somatics refers to any practice that uses the mind-body connection to help survey one's internal self. The word somatics comes from the Greek root soma, which means 'the living organism in its wholeness.' It is used to understand human beings as a unit of mind/body/spirit, and as social, relational beings. Somatics can encompass various ways of utilizing the body that are therapeutic, educational, creative, and/or physically expressive. It is an umbrella term to explain techniques and methods of sensory awareness, touch, breath, and movement to address and enhance human functioning (Johnson, 2018). My use of the term somatics also refers to the relationship of dress, movement, the pose, and the body. The way dress and movement work together and relate to each other elicits specific psychophysical awareness that can be considered joyful and pleasurable. For my purposes, somatics refers to the many uses of the body whether through adornment, movement, expression and more, to enact reclamations of joy and pleasure.

Joy and Pleasure

I use Imani Perry's conception of Black joy and pleasure to analyze my case studies. Perry says, "Blackness is an immense and defiant joy" (Perry, 2020). The embrace of Black life reflects the Black feminist praxis of understanding joy and pleasure as forms of resistance, self-care, and power. Perry, in an interview, asserts that "exhilaration in black life is not to mute or minimize racism, but to shame racism, to damn it to hell…. Do not misunderstand. This [joy] is not an absence of grief or rage, or a distraction. It is insistence" (Perry, 2020). Thus, Black joy and pleasure can be defined as any feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or satisfaction as a response to imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, etc. I am most focused on the responses of joy and pleasure as acted out through the medium of the body.

Black joy and pleasure are contested topics, in general, but especially in politics. Starting with white slaveowners, their bewilderment of how their human property might feign happiness in enslavement was evidenced by the propagated politicized images of "happy darkies" in minstrelsy (Dessens, 2003). White slaveowners thought that because they could not understand Black joy and pleasure, it must come from complacency with enslavement, stupidity, and ignorance. Even in our current context, there is a white conflation of Blackness with suffering and dependency. There is an assumption that because we are still fighting for liberation, there is no room in our lives for joy or pleasure. However, Black joy and pleasure are rooted in the struggle for liberation. In Lindsey Stewart's (2021) book *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-abolitionism*, she recounts numerous examples of Black joy and pleasure where Black suffering is expected. So, while our bodies are exposed to myriad cycles of oppression, I envision the ways in which Black women's bodies are also sites of joy and pleasure.

Misogynoir

According to Srivastava, Chaudhury, Bhat, and Sahu, the term "misogyny" is derived from the Ancient Greek word 'mīsoguníā' which means hatred towards women (Srivastava et al., 2017). Noir (or noire) is the French word for black. Misogynoir, then, describes anti-Black misogyny. The term was coined in 2008 by Moya Bailey and Trudy (2018), who have since been erased from the associations of the term. Misogynoir is violence against Black women. The violent and pervasive experience of gendered racism on Black women is an embodied practice. It is acted out in (mis)representations of Black women, oversexualization, and reproductive bondage, which are just a few examples. Later, I further elucidate my inclusion of the term misogynoir in my analysis and explicate how it supports racist narratives that are rooted in imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism.

Body politics

The term body politics refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body (Brown & Gershon, 2017). Our bodies are sites in which social constructions of difference, such as race and gender, are mapped onto human beings. Feminist scholars have argued that our bodies are colonized and socially shaped based on political practices of containment and control (Davis, 1981). Feminists have also used body politics to fight against the objectification and violence against the female body (political debates about rape and abortion, for example). Because of where Black women are situated in society, the body is a crucial site of Black women's experiences of injustice. Black women are often hypervisible and represented in stereotyped and commodified ways. On the one hand, body politics encompasses the hegemonic powers that control bodies, and, on the other hand, the resistance and protest against such powers through the body. I employ the concept of body politics to

remind us that the body, especially the Black female body, is implicitly political, and holds liberatory potential through its mere existence.

Necropolitics

Coined by Achille Mbembe (2003), necropolitics is defined as the sovereign determination of who lives and dies. Mbembe describes necropolitics as the "right" of social and/or political institutions to impose social or literal death, to enslave, and/or enact other forms of political violence (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003). In this dissertation, understanding the historical context of Black women's lives, globally, requires a discussion of necropolitics to describe how Black women, namely their bodies, bear the weight of anti-Black state violence. I argue that gendered necropolitics is another system that Black women can traverse through embodiment.

Fashion-industrial complex

I refer to the fashion industry as an industrial-complex to highlight the fashion industry's collaboration with the social and political systems of society and the creation of profit from these systems (Black et al., 2017). I liken the fashion-industrial complex to the prison-industrial complex because it also pursues its own financial interests regardless of, and often at the expense of, the best interests of society and individuals. The prison-industrial complex is used to describe the relationship between the government and various other institutions and businesses that benefit from mass incarceration, which disproportionately impacts Black communities (Davis, 2003). Coincidently, fashion businesses are implicated in the prison-industrial complex because many use prison labor, domestic and international, to manufacture textiles, shoes, and clothing (Browne, 2010). This is, essentially, free labor for these fashion companies and is historically rooted in war capitalism and slavery.

Dress

According to dress scholars Joanne Eicher and Mary Roach-Higgins the dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). Their definition of dress expands beyond clothing to tattoos, piercings, body paint, etc. (modifications) and hats, headscarves, purses, etc. (supplements). Black people have traditionally used dress and body adornment for creative expression and as means of identity formation. Black dress is grounded in African heritage and continuities, legacies of slavery and resistance, encounters and alliances between Africans, Indigenous/Native groups, and Europeans, group commitments to faith, and politics of gender. For the purposes of this dissertation, I do not differentiate between dress and costume as some scholars prefer (Eicher, Evenson, & Lutz, 2008; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2012). According to Eicher (1997) costume refers to an ensemble that individuals perform in dance, theater, or a masquerade, hiding or temporarily canceling an individual's everyday identity. It is my position that the dress I analyze in selected images does not masquerade or hide identity, but instead draws attention to it. Eicher also notes that costume can refer to ensembles of clothing (folk costume) worn by members of an ethnic group for special occasions that serve as an affirmation of the group's traditions and solidarity. As I will discuss, the clothing worn by the Black women analyzed in the study both affirms and highlights their allegiances to the Black diaspora, culturally and politically. For simplicity, I use 'dress' to describe their modifications and supplements to the body.

Objectives

As a Black woman whose research resides at the intersection of Black studies and dress studies, my goal is to inject a decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist canon and thought into archival analysis. In addition to interrogating and contextualizing Black women's embodied practices as a form of liberation, my research questions the nature of the archives, their relationship to Black cultural production, material culture, images, and embodied practice. Through my research, I intend to safeguard the liberatory legacies of Black femmes whose documents are housed in the archives. My three central research objectives are:

(1) To expand the understanding of the use of Black women's dress and dress practices with the somatics of joy and pleasure;

(2) To problematize the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy's mainstream interpretation of Black women's embodied practices across time and place;

(3) To develop a revitalized decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist methodology for analyzing Black archival materials.

My analysis aims to demonstrate that Black women's emotional, intellectual, spiritual, cultural, personal, and political positions have carried liberatory potential inside of and despite the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy our society is enmeshed in. I argue for a more complex understanding of how Black women's bodies are positioned in contemporary profit-driven systems. I emphasize how dressed bodies, particularly Black women's dressed bodies, engage and interact in social and cultural relations, and the discourse that critiques these practices with a Black feminist-womanist lens. This configuration of theory invites a more diverse, multi-cultural participation in dress studies for critical discussion of the making and marking of Black subjectivities.

Through it, I argue that Black women's embodiment provides a typology of Black femme liberatory praxis.

The dissertation is organized to story the background, literature, theoretical, and methodological considerations I take in analyzing the case studies. After this introduction, I provide a literature review in chapter two, in which I describe relevant studies about embodiment, Black women, including a discussion of my first theoretical consideration, Black feminism-womanism, spirituality, intimacy and the erotic, dress and somatics. Since I am looking primarily at archival imagery, I also describe studies that point to narrativizing Black imagery and views on the Black female body. Lastly, in chapter two, I review literature in Black joy and pleasure as well as the exploitation of Black embodiment. In chapter three, I provide my second theoretical consideration, decolonizing methodologies. Although both Black feminism-womanism and decolonizing theories inform my study, I purposefully discuss Black feminism-womanism in the literature review to story how embodiment, Black women's intellectual production, and somatics are intimately connected. I place embodiment theory and Black feminism-womanism in the literature review instead of in the theoretical framework to situate how the theory is in direct conversation with the extant literature of this particular study.

I discuss decolonizing methodologies as my theoretical framework to say that the methodology is *the* theory or approach to challenge traditional Eurocentric research methods. My placement of my theoretical positions in different chapters of the dissertation does not mean that they are not to be connected, but instead that they inform the work differently. In chapter four, I discuss the methodology of my analysis which includes the research design, how I approach narrativizing the images, and brief introductions to the case studies. In chapters five, six, and seven, I analyze each case study. Lastly, in chapter eight, I provide some concluding thoughts and implications of

the study. I don’t call this chapter the conclusion because this work is a meditation. It is never complete. I imagine future studies using this approach will be ongoing.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Embodiment

My understanding of embodiment comes from two scholars, sociologist, Joanne Entwistle, and Black feminist theorist, Hortense Spillers. While their conceptions differ, I find them both useful for this interdisciplinary study. Through their theoretical analyses, I explore and navigate multiple sites and methodologies of contemporary dress studies.

Joanne Entwistle posits that dress is a crucial aspect of embodiment, that shapes the self physically and psychologically. In *Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice,* Entwistle (2000) argues that the dressed body attempts to bridge the gap that exists between theories of the body, which often overlook dress and theories of fashion and dress which often ignore the body. She focuses on the means by which clothing imparts social identity on its wearers, particularly how dress, through the social world, gives the wearer identity. Entwistle writes, "Dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them...dress in everyday life cannot be separated from the living, breathing, moving body it adorns" (2000, pp. 7-9). Thus, her analysis of dress practices includes embodiment. Following her assessment, dressing the body can be considered a primary somatic movement, whether we consciously consider it as such or not.

Entwistle (2015), also considers the differences between how men and women relate to their bodies. In *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Entwistle explains that societal roles are gendered. This is because the rules that govern what men and

women should wear are highly patriarchal and sexist. The female body and the regulation of women's clothing have always been the under the purview of patriarchy, capitalism, religion, and growing globalization.

Women have always received contradictory messages about their bodies. Sometimes, the female body is glorified by ideal images of the Virgin Mary in Catholic churches, for example (Heartney, 2003). Other times, it is expected to symbolize the honor of the family, community, and nation (Attie, 1998). The same body is also projected as shameful, embarrassing, and disgusting as evidenced by the experiences of menstruating and/or breastfeeding women (Chrisler, 2011), aging women (Krekula, 2016), and those considered promiscuous (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Seeley, 2014).

Entwistle also notes that clothing has long been thought to communicate messages about women, in particular, their sexuality. The idea that women can "ask for it" simply by wearing certain types of clothing persists today in popular discourse and rape trials. Entwistle also mentions that in the workplace, women struggle against the ingrained association of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment. Her use of the concept of embodiment acknowledges "the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture" (2000, p. 11). I use Entwistle's framework as a reference point for embodiment. However, I also acknowledge the weakness of her clothing theory that does not attend to the body as a racialized site of experience and subjectivity.

Hortense Spillers (1987) in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, offers a complex and thoughtful analysis of how American grammar as a symbolic system insistently marks the Black female body with a series of meanings that profoundly complicate its gendering. She explains that the root cause of this tension is the transatlantic slave trade and the severing of familial

bonds through slavery. As the family structure was disrupted by slavery (stolen, sold, killed, etc.), Black female dominance and strength, out of necessity, became interpreted as unfeminine. She posits that slavery (un)gendered Black women. This happened in several ways. First, Black women's reproductive capacity became a mere commodity. A Virginia Law written in 1819, determined that the offspring of slaves would also have enslaved status even if the father was white or the slaveowner himself (Schermerhorn, 2015). This incentivized slave owners to sexually assault and rape enslaved women to ensure the future of their workforce. This proves that white men used Black women's bodies for monetary gain.

Slavery also (un)gendered Black women through marital rights. Black women were not allowed to marry. Marriage as a legally binding contract would have given the enslaved the recognition that they are humans and citizens under the law, neither of which were economically or politically valuable to white slaveholders and others that upheld the institution of slavery. Even after slavery, Black women were still excluded from the cultural norms of femininity and womanhood. For example, white women could have a Black man lynched for as little as whistling at her, but did not have to testify in court, under the pretense of protecting white women's fragile emotional psyches. Similarly, a white woman's sexual purity was protected at all costs and was considered a defining characteristic of her womanhood. Black women did not have the same level of protection, legal or otherwise and they could not be legally raped. Enslaved Black women had no legal means to resist or protect themselves from sexual assault by white slaveowners (Schermerhorn, 2015). As early as the 1830s, Black women abolitionists called for laws to recognize Black women as fully human and have a right to control their bodies and grant or withhold consent (Downs & Masur, 2015). Despite this, white men raped Black women well after slavery and rape was used as a tool of terror (Jacobs & Fleischner, 2010).

Additionally, even after slavery, Black women were forced to labor in white homes and take care of white children to make a living. This meant that they could not devote time to taking care of their own families, including their children. This is ironic because society had categorized white women as hardworking and caring in their households, including caring for the Black women that they owned. On the other hand, by the end of slavery, society had categorized Black women as unfit mothers and unintelligent despite white mothers needing Black mothers to wet nurse white children and care for pregnant white women (Glymph, 2008) throughout slavery and beyond. White womanliness has always been considered violent by Black women because white women have actively participated in the social, economic, and corporeal subjugation of Black women.

In her essay, "Interstices" (2003), Spillers writes that slavery, and the conditions after slavery, made Black women "the principle point of passage between the human and non-human" (p. 199); the location of the Black female, and particularly of Black female womanhood, remains not only physically and sexually exotic, but analytically so, as well. Historically, the Black woman is nearly entirely bound up in structures of domination and commerce, Spillers suggests then, that Black womanhood becomes an "analytical bottleneck." Thus, the position of the Black woman is often read as an interstice, "a chaotic, empty, or excessive location, a structural gap" (pp. 199-200).

Black Feminism, Womanism, and Embodiment

In Spillers' (2003) formulation of the body as a modality of Black feminist literacy she explicates the physical and psychic terrain of Black women's gendering. She shows how critical emphasis around Black women's affective and embodied experiences are imperative to understand how Black women perform their femininity. Her analysis also highlights how the systemic rupture between the Black female body and core aspects of womanhood such as sexuality and motherhood cause a rift between predominantly white feminist fights and those of Black feminism. Spillers' piece undergirds much of the main thread of Black feminist historical, narrative and cultural studies practice. Her analysis illuminates that the language of gender, namely the designation "woman," does not necessarily include Black women. This observation has also been brought up by earlier scholars, activists, and feminist practitioners, such as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1984), Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith in *But Some of Us Are Brave (1982)*, and Alice Walker's "womanism" (1984). Because Spillers uses the body as the cornerstone of her analysis, it attends to innovative, affective understandings of justice for Black women, one that sees cultural production of the body as a necessary terrain for liberation. Informed by Spillers' analysis of embodiment, I deploy a Black feminist-womanist worldview (Walker, 1984; hooks, 2000; Maparyan, 2006; 2012; Nash, 2019; Johnson, 2020) to elucidate how Black women's subconscious, spiritualized, and embodied politics have been put into everyday use. I use the term womanism as a broadly defined concept of Black feminism. While some have regarded womanism as synonymous with Black feminism or as a supplement to it, others have understood it to replace feminism altogether. Due to the dynamic nature of womanism as a term, theory, and practice, there are

overlaps of concerns *and* tensions between womanism and Black feminism which warrant discussion of their use in my analysis.

Black feminism has highlighted Black women as agents of knowledge. A distinguishing feature of Black feminism is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions are essential for social change (Hill Collins, 2000). Black feminists adopt global feminist agendas such as the economic status of women, political rights, marital and family issues, and reproduction rights. A Black feminist agenda, however, positions Black women to examine how the issues affecting Black women are a part of women's issues that seek emancipation, globally (Hill Collins, 1996). Additionally, using the term "Black feminist" disrupts the racism inherent in mainstream feminism's for-whites-only ideology (Hill Collins, 1996). As bell hooks (2015) explained in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Black women have always championed gender rights issues despite the assumption that white women have initiated all feminist resistance to male chauvinism in America. She also states that historiographers have overstated Black women's sole commitment to eliminating racism, which makes it seem that their anti-racist work precluded their women's rights activities. She goes on to write that white women's complacency in racism has prevented actual sisterhood within the mainstream white feminist movement. She says:

> Initially, black feminists approached the women's movement white women had organized eager to join the struggle to end sexist oppression. We were disappointed and disillusioned when we discovered that white women in the movement had little knowledge or concern for the problems of lower class and poor women or the particular problems of nonwhite women of all classes. (p. 188)

From a peripheral position in the movement, Black feminists saw that white feminists made women's liberation synonymous with women obtaining the right to participate in the very system they identified as oppressive. Therefore, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental shift in the way oppression is conceived. By embracing an intersectional paradigm (Crenshaw, 1989) of race, class, and gender, as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminists reconceptualize the social relations of dominance and resistance (Hill Collins, 2000). Because my analysis highlights the way in which Black women have traversed the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy with their bodies, a Black feminist lens allows for a comprehensive historical and social analysis of Black women's bodies and their positions.

According to *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory*, womanism is:

> A term coined by Alice Walker to describe the specificity of Black feminism and contrast it to what she sees as an ethnocentric and separatist white feminism. Womanism designates a political continuum of Black women whose struggles and alliances occupy several fronts in a non-exclusive manner. (Andermahr et al., 1997, p. 238)

Womanist as defined by Alice Walker (1984) is taken from *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose.* She explains poetically that the term womanist is from "womanish" and refers to one being outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful, which is the opposite of "girlish" meaning frivolous, irresponsible, and not serious. Walker's definition also states that a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color. Moreover, a womanist is:

> …a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people,

> male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health…Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1984, pp. xi-xii)

Through a womanist worldview, an important feature, spirituality, is structured by the power relations of gender, colonialism, race, class, disability, etc. Womanism offers a site of resistance to whitewashed constructions of spirituality. It refuses to separate individual spirituality from the collective political movement and values the creative, emotional, and psychic lives of Black people struggling against oppression. Although there are many other renowned and respected womanist scholars (Ogunyemi, 1985; Hudson-Weems, 1993; Cannon, 1995) who have helped usher womanist theory into the academy, I rely on Layli Maparyan's comprehensive conceptualization of womanism for my analysis. Maparyan (2012) offers a womanist "triad of concern" in which human-spiritual relationships are at the top of the triangle point, followed by human-nature relationships and human-human relationships, all interconnected. She explains that spirituality is directly tied to the earth and body which have all been exploited for capital gain. In an imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal society that wants us disconnected from ourselves, others, and the earth, Maparyan's "triad of concern" is revolutionary because she holds the spiritual to the highest esteem. Her conception of the human-spiritual relationship at the top of the triangle also suggests that spirit is essential in how people choose to exist, understand, and see themselves. This means that material oppression can threaten spirituality, specifically for Black women, because spirituality is integral to feeling "wholeness" (Betts, 2012; Saunders-Newton, 2019).

In womanist scholarship, the major sources for understanding the spiritual and religious consciousness of Black women include biographies, journals, narratives, novels, prayers, and similar references by Black women that reflect their faith experiences (Coleman, 2006). Womanism, while intentionally and unapologetically spiritual, "is not aligned with one particular religion, faith, or life system" (Maparyan, 2012, p. 36). The goal outlined in the work of womanist scholars is to shape the practices and values of the Black faith community based on an understanding of the ways in which the experiences of Black women have shaped Black sacred rhetoric. From a womanist perspective, social change is undergirded with spirituality, psychological growth, creativity, consciousness and/or emotional maturation, similar to the process of somatics. Like somatics, womanism prioritizes tuning into the body, allowing us to access sensations, emotions, and information unavailable to the logical mind. Both somatics and womanism suggests that the consciousness of our bodies transcends that of our material circumstance, a connection to the spiritual. Because I envision embodiment as a sacrament to liberation, womanism is an appropriate lens by which to analyze Black women's embodiment which is connected to radical internal change.

At the Intersection of Spirituality and Embodiment

Maparyan (2011), in *The Womanist Idea*, explains that we all experience suffering in our particular embodied racial, gender, and sexual identities. In a chapter of her book, entitled, "Spiritual Activism: A Womanist Approach" she contends that womanism offers an embodied, powerful, effective, and visionary social change praxis through spiritual activism. Spiritual activism, as Maparyan understands it, comes from women's studies scholars Gloria E. Anzaldua and AnaLouise Keating. Maparyan asks, "Where is the pivotal site of intervention in any situation? What is the root cause of societal, environmental, even individual problems? …the root cause of reality is the nexus of our thought and our feeling – heart, mind" (p. 117). This "heart, mind nexus" is in relationship to the conceptualization of somatics. By fusing corporeality under particular oppressive circumstances, with our psychological states, emotions, or "heart, mind", we can participate in spiritual activism. Maparyan explains that "spiritual activism can involve the active application of metaphysical knowledge toward material ends" (Maparyan, 2011, p. 119). Her analysis of spiritual activism suggests that activist engagement is not primarily a matter of intellectual, political, or social struggle, but spiritual too. Additionally, the concept of spiritual activism implies that the corporeal preparation for freedom or liberation is inextricably linked to a spiritual component.

Maparyan goes on to explain how her conceptualization of spiritual activism is a logical extension of Black women's activism. She justifies that Black women as "leaders in organizing, mediating, reconciling, and healing a world overrun with conflict, violence, and dehumanization, have historically used culturally embedded practices of everyday spirituality, inside and outside of religious spheres, for common survival and protest" (p. 141). The metaphysical or esoteric knowledge that Maparyan refers to as spiritual activism is contained in embodiment. Her

conceptualization of spiritual activism relates to embodiment and specifically how our bodies carry physical and psychological wounds of oppression while developing new methods (mind-related or body-related) to deconstruct oppression more deeply. This suggests that incorporating mind-body awareness can promote both personal healing and a deeper understanding of systemic oppression in a way that traverses material and physical oppression.

In the same vein, Maparyan also introduces the idea of "luxocracy" which means "rule by light" (p. 4). The light refers to an inner light, the internal self. She compares luxocracy to better-known systems of social organization. She says, "Like democracy, luxocraxy is egalitarian…like anarchy, luxocracy eschews formal hierarchal structures of government…like theocracy, luxocracy is spiritualized…" (p. 4). She suggests that there are limitations to hierarchal structures of government too, saying, "Unlike democracy, luxocracy rests on a foundation of spirituality…unlike anarchy, luxocracy is thoroughly benevolent and nonviolent…unlike theocracy, luxocracy rests on internal, personal notions of spirituality rather than external, organized religion" (p. 4). For Maparyan's womanist approach, when Black women have reached the material limit of perceived "freedom" in systems of social organization, there is greater potential in luxocracy and/or spiritual activism. Her conception of luxocracy also relates to the politics of Black joy and pleasure. In a way, the concept of Black joy and pleasure is a type of spiritual happiness that insists that there is more to life than white conceptions of us, there is more to life than racism and oppression.

Intimacy and Embodiment

Jessica Johnson (2020) in *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*, uses the archives to engage with corporeal and metaphysical readings of Black intimacy, joy, and pleasure during slavery. In the book she questions definitions of freedom by analyzing archival documents from the making of modern-day New Orleans including slave owner journals and slave narratives. Through various historical narratives, she deconstructs Black womanhood, but, more importantly, thinks through how enslaved Africans engaged with the experience of bondage and demanded something more from already established conceptions of freedom. She stories how enslaved girls and women attempted to secure manumission through legal means, but also offers examples of "unofficial" acts of freedom, what she refers to as "geographies of pleasure and spirit." For example, she stories how African women at Saint-Louis and Gorée distinguished themselves by providing hospitality to commercial agents, "cultivating a culture of taste and aesthetic pleasure that facilitated trade" (p. 6). The women not only offered certain hospitalities, but also used certain dress items such as headwraps and embroidered skirts to culturally represent themselves as hospitable hostesses. That is, women used aesthetic negotiations in dress and their bodies, for liberatory praxis. Johnson stories how African women's cultural labor, including their bodily adornment practices, "managed taste and defined standards of hospitality . . . through . . . performances of wealth, prestige, and decadence" (p. 30) to make Black communities anew. Johnson also examines violent patterns of sex, labor, and domination that enslaved Black women endured. Despite this, Johnson retells the "deeply feminine, feminized, and femme practices" by which Black women "claimed ownership over themselves" (pp. 172-173) by having sexual relations (or refusing sexual relations), giving birth, dressing the body (or undressing the body), being in full command of their own intimacy. This is

to say that we, Black femmes, have confronted violent infringement on our personhood and subjectivity, through joy and pleasure by way of intimacy enacted through our bodies.

Dress and Embodiment

Tanisha Ford, a Black fashion scholar, has also conceptualized embodiment. Her book *Liberated Threads* is about how everyday women turned the process of getting dressed into a powerful political act that transformed the cultural and political landscape of the 1960s and 70s around the world. She highlights that studies of mid-twentieth-century social movements typically focus on policy issues, the fight to integrate public spaces, and big sociopolitical events, such as marches and protests. However, what is missing is a focus on everyday acts such as dressing our bodies to understand how everyday people participate in politics. She explores the various ways that fashion and style connected people to the global movement for Black freedom. Angela Davis' college activism is one of her examples. In the chapter of Ford's book entitled "Soul Style on Campus: American College Women and Black Power Fashion," she explains how college campuses became important spaces for "soul style" innovation and cultural discourse about Blackness. "Soul style" is an embodied language that Africana people use to rebuild their psyches and heal emotional and physical wounds from the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Ford says that this language, "led to a re-aestheticization of blackness, which created new value and political power for the black body" (p. 23). Examples of "soul style" include wearing one's hair in an afro, wearing a dashiki, or showing more skin than considered respectable, all nods to the African continent. Her book illustrates how Black women embodied "soul style" despite the violent environment in which this cultural production was created.

In Ford's memoir (2019), *Dressed in Dreams*, she tells the story of her life through chapters that focus on iconic garments and styles. By describing important fashion items in relation to the social and political issues of her life, she illuminates how clothes are not just garments by which we adorn our bodies. The book highlights the role of Black dress in Black struggle and liberation. It also proves that appropriating a sartorial lens can lead to a more nuanced understanding of a time period or context. In the chapter of her memoir, entitled "Tennis Shoes," she remembers her favorite sneakers and how wearing the wrong colors in her neighborhood could mean getting physically attacked by gangs. In addition to recalling her personal style and clothing choices, the chapter also discusses different types of Black cultural production, namely hip-hop music, and provides commentary about crime in Black communities, the crack epidemic, and state-sanctioned anti-drug campaigns. These historical markers are associated with Black embodied practices because certain sneakers symbolized the rise of gangster rap and fear of hyper-criminal Black teenagers or "superpredators," to the white mainstream public. A "superpredator" is a myth to criminalize urban, Black young men. The term and concept were coined by academia in the 1990s (Jennings, 2014). Ford's analysis of Black embodiment situated in Black historical protest, in both *Liberated Threads* and *Dressed in Dreams*, indicates that the way Black women choose to dress can be a form of embodied activism.

Somatics and Embodiment

In addition to dress, movement has also been studied and conceptualized as an embodied practice. In her article, "Facing and Transforming Hauntings of Race through the Arts," dance studies scholar, Rosemarie Roberts (2011) examines how dance and performance can communicate issues of social injustice. She analyzes two case studies of dancers, Katherine

Dunham and Ronald K. Brown, to explore the concept of "social ghosts." The term social ghosts denotes the internalized dynamics of oppression that individuals absorb and learn. The term also refers to the pervasive social injustices present throughout social institutions, structures, and bodies (Roberts, 2011). These social ghosts are ever prevalent despite efforts to ignore or subvert them. Roberts posits that Black dancers, through their choreography, transgress the boundaries of body and language to engage in a kind of teaching/learning that provokes encounters with the social ghosts of racial injustice. Black dancers often utilize movements of the body to connect personal narratives of oppression to historical dehumanization.

Similarly, in her 2013 article "Dancing with Social Ghosts: Performing Embodiments, Analyzing Critically" and recent book *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race, and Power* (2021), Roberts acknowledges Black bodies as sites of knowledge production. In "Dancing with Social Ghosts: Performing Embodiments, Analyzing Critically," she says there are "ways in which social science research on Black and Brown performing bodies is undertaken that obscures the ways in which Black and Brown bodies produce experience, histories, and affects as knowledge" (p. 4). To problematize these ways of research, she examines a segment of a hip-hop dance workshop to draw further attention to the ways in which the body can be employed as a mode of analysis and act as a release reference point. She looks at stuttering steps, raised eyebrows, wide-eyed glances, and other mannerisms of dance, and finds that performing Black and Brown bodies bear the burden and embody the weight of their histories and experiences. By dancing, dancers move bodily experiences from private (internal) into public spaces (external). The corporeal articulations of dance give public viewers insights about injustice based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Her book, *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race, and Power*, further elucidates this idea by using primary sources

to reveal that hip-hop dance cannot be divorced from sociopolitical contexts and is a form of embodied activism.

Stephanie Evans similarly approaches another movement practice, yoga, to explore Black women's embodiment. In her 2021 book, *Black Women's Yoga History: Memoirs of Inner Peace*, she explores various historical memoirs (including Katherine Dunham and Angela Davis) to discover hidden narratives about Black women's healing traditions that contest the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Some of her inspiration for the book comes from "spiritual bypassing" which is the tendency to use metaphysical concepts to ignore yoga's political roots, issues of race, and capitalist exploitation in the wellness industry. At the same time, she acknowledges an "inner voice" in the quest for liberation. She says, "for Black women, health and wellness usually are not possible without healing from some sort of violence or traumatic stress, whether personal, structural, cultural – all ungirded by historical violence" (p. 3). She investigates self-care or inner peace narratives of elder Black women who have been subjected to personal, cultural, and/or structural violence. Evans connects Black women's liberation with personal and collective healing. She examines, for example, Rosa Parks' yoga practice, Tina Turner's chanting practice, and Katherine Dunham's dancing practice to sustain themselves and seek a semblance of justice in the world. She also calls Black women's justice-seeking an embodied endeavor, that is both internal and external. Her analysis of embodied healing serves as the orientation for my conception of embodied liberation.

These scholars, Maparyan, Ford, Roberts, and Evans, although from different entry points have a commonality. They center Black bodies as sites of knowledge production, which is integral to the liberation from cultural, social, and historical oppressions enacted on them. Their insights question what it means to "do" social change. The subtext is that Black women have had

to adjust their minds and bodies to survive in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal society. This is because of necropolitics in action. The gendered necropolitics of transnational anti-Black violence is expansive and includes what Muriel Vinson (2018) calls embodied suicide. She defines embodied suicide as "the practice of actively preventing the full expression of one's embodiment/expression of self/truth in order to preserve a feeling of safety" (p. 241). It is important to note that embodied suicide is forced. Vinson continues that these are self-policing tactics and survival techniques that are meant to protect from intergenerational trauma, oppression, and objectification. Social work scholar, Joy DeGruy (2005), calls this Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), an ongoing impact. She states that the slave experience was one of continual violence and traumatization of the Black body, mind, and spirit. This process is ongoing as state-sanctioned violence continues to, literally, kill Black men and women. Understanding the ways in which Black embodiment and Black women's embodiment is a historical manifestation of persecution of the body explicates how political and artistic iterations of that embodiment have liberatory potential.

Narrativizing Black Archival Imagery

Across the humanities, there has been a critical engagement with colonial and post-colonial archives in the last few decades. This engagement is characterized by the interrogation of historical records and archives not as sites of historical truth, but rather as means of imperial and colonial control (Stoler, 2002). The politics of what is included in institutional or formal archives generally privileges hegemonic positions and narratives, resulting in an erasure of the memory of disenfranchised social groups (Genovese, 2016). For this reason, researchers have looked to alternative ways of representing past and present events by (re)narrativizing the events and stories that were once silenced in those archives.

Stoler (2002) in "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form" places emphasis on looking to archives as a process rather than a thing. She "looks to archives as epistemological experiments rather than sources, to colonial archives as cross-sections of contested knowledge [and memories] (p. 83). Through the epistemological experiment, marginalized groups such as Black women, have been misrepresented, silenced, and inadequately read. Michael Hanchard (2008), in his theorization of knowledge and memory, draws a distinction between institutional archival memory and Black memory. He contends that Black memory forms are in tension with the parameters and symbols of official narratives. He says,

> we might consider and conceptualize black memory as horizontally constituted, with its archaeological deposits strewn across several time zones and territories. State memory (like most forms of state expression), on the other hand, is vertically constituted. National-state memory and black memory are not co-terminus. (p. 46)

Historically, the archives (as a place and process) have pushed Black narratives and memory construction to the margins because white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal institutions have been the arbiters of formal archival knowledge.

Fludernik (1996) discusses narrativization as the imposition of narrativity by a receiver on an object. In short, this means that narrativity is not a stable characteristic of an object, but rests on the receiver's experience of the object. The white, supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal institution cannot, then, be the "truth" (or sole truth) of a narrative. Similarly, if narrativity relies on the receiver or reader, Black readings of archival materials that feature Black people offer (re)storying of Black narratives both within the colonial and the extraterritorial dimensions of Black diasporic consciousness. This point of view seems fruitful for reading Black

women's bodies. Relying on a Black feminist-womanist lens to narrativize Black women's corporeal experiences offers access to other ways of imagining "truth." Aligning with the critical shift of narrativizing Black archival imagery, my dissertation follows a similar trajectory.

Views on Black Women's Bodies

The dynamics of viewing Black women's bodies in imagery is undergirded by the gendered, raced, and sexualized relationships that were created under colonialism (Benard, 2016). Ann L. Stoler and Patricia Hill Collins have been foundational in my focus on Black women's bodies. Stoler (1989), in "Making the Empire Respectable", demonstrates that sexualizing, demeaning, and exploiting Black women's bodies were integral to colonialism. Racial oppression/exploitation compounded with gender inequalities were essential to the structure of colonial authority. For example, she notes that colonial observers had an unlimited interest in the sexual interface of the colonial encounter. She states, "the tropics provided a site for European pornographic fantasies" (p. 635). Based on colonial literature and visual representations, race, gender, and class had a symbiotic relationship with notions of the tropics and the exotic. Her explanation elucidates that sex and racist stereotypes went hand in hand in describing "the Other." Edward Said's treatment of orientalist discourse and "the Other" supports her analysis. In his book *Orientalism*, Said defined Orientalism as thought processes in which there is a discriminatory distinction between "the Orient" and "the "Occident." Stoler argues that the sexual submission and possession of the "Other" (Black women) illustrates the iconography of rule, the colonizer versus the colonized. In viewing Black women's bodies, exoticized and sexualized analysis has been the norm based on colonial invention.

Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins connects colonialism to surveillance and (re)defining of the Black female body. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New*

Racism, Collins (2004) analyzes the case of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman as the quintessential Black female erotic body under extreme scrutiny. Sarah Baartman, also known as the "the Hottentot Venus" was first shown and exhibited to a European audience by an English ship surgeon. She was dressed in a skin-tight bodystocking, beadwork, feathers, and face paint and presented as a representation of African womanhood before a primarily white male audience. Her likeness was distorted and commodified for European audiences. After her death at the age of 26, Baartman's brain, skeleton and sexual organs remained on display at the Musee de L'Homme in Paris until 1974 as a case of human aberration and rarity. Her remains were repatriated and buried only in 2002, in post-Apartheid South Africa. In *Black Feminist Thought,* Collins states, "The exhibition of Sarah Baartman and Black women on the auction block were not benign intellectual exercises; these practices defended real material and political interests" (p.139). The sale and purchase of images of Black women, as presented by 19th century white men was preceded by the conscious dehumanization of women and the commodification of their bodies. The dehumanization supported and continues to support the colonial art of misreading and misrepresenting Black women, which is intrinsically tied up with material violence and injustice.

In *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, curator, critic, writer, and art historian, Deborah Willis (2002) and co-author Carla Williams, provide a theoretical critique of the photographic representations of the Black female body from the early 19th century to contemporary times. The book is a photographic history of Black women's imagery from "medical" photos used to draw attention to the breasts, butt, and texture of pubic hair, to asexual images of the "mammy," to expressions of Black pride and identity. Their research indicates that Black female imagery is deeply rooted in colonial representations of nudity. They also question Black women's agency in the image making; what they call visual agency. Willis and Williams

define visual agency as the act of confronting false identity representations and controlling the representation. Willis and Williams reject a victimizing analysis of the images. Instead, they focus on how Black women might have used their bodies to regain agency in imagery. I employ a similar practice in my analysis.

Black Joy and Pleasure

The insistence on embracing individual and collective joy and pleasure has long been integrated into Black feminism. One example that illustrates this is Audre Lorde's 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Lorde argues that women have a particular capacity to experience a pleasurable sense of satisfaction in *all* areas of their lives when we are in touch with the internal sensation that she refers to as "the erotic." She insists that the erotic is a resource within all of us that resides within a deeply feminine and spiritual plane. It is rooted in the power of women's unexpressed or unrecognized feelings. Society has taught us to suspect the erotic. As Sanya Osho discusses in his article, "Unraveling the Silences of Black Sexualities," colonizers deprived the colonized of sexual agency to make them pliable for penetrative attentions which either virginized or hypersexualized them. This resulted in a colonized sexuality in which we have internalized the sexual values of the dominant culture. Dominant and colonial cultural values deem sexuality, the erotic, and non-dichotomous genders as sin. This recreates the erotic as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from positive liberatory context. This use of eroticism, as a companion to colonialism, devalues the erotic as a form of liberation. Black women have been made to suffer the contempt of eroticism through the lens of white manliness. Consequently, so many of us have suppressed the erotic. Lorde, however, views the erotic as a source of power that can create change. For Black women, the embrace of the erotic might conjure up specific feelings of joy and pleasure.

Following Lorde's work, contemporary Black feminists, such as bell hooks and Jennifer Nash have similarly centered the role of joy and pleasure in the lives of Black women. In her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," bell hooks (1993) contemplates Black women's relationship to media. She says that for many Black women, their "encounter with the screen [media] *hurts*." hooks places hope in Black women's ability to "contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent [their likeness] on multiple levels" (p. 317). As critical spectators, Black women have an "oppositional gaze" when engaging with the media and this "oppositional gaze" can support Black women in navigating the pain inflicted by the media. The oppositional gaze gives Black women a space to have new pleasure, the pleasure of rejecting typical, racist, conceptions of their likeness and enjoying media through a critical lens. Similarly, Nash (2012) in "Theorizing Pleasure: New Directions in Black Feminist Studies" suggests that there should be room for sexual visibility and sexual discretion in Black women's representations. She rejects the binary of the hypersexual or the modest and, instead, connects pleasure to a language of Black women's individual rights and preferences for an erotic revolution.

Exploitation of Embodiment

In U.S. popular culture, particularly within the industries that are adjacent to the fashion-industrial complex (music, film, art, video-gaming, academia, etc.), there is a preponderance of representational violence enacted on Black women's bodies. The duality of hypervisibility and invisibility of Black women is obvious. Black women's embodied practices are exploited through stereotypes, exoticism, and commodification, just to name a few. bell hooks (2015) in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, has a chapter titled "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace." She states, "representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or

critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th century racism, and which still shape perceptions today" (p. 62). She also mentions that representations of Black women tend to call attention to the body in a manner that invites the gaze to mutilate the Black female body. A focus on the "butt," for example, or hair are attempts to fragment her as if she is not a whole being. George Yancy (2017) also problematizes Black corporeal representation in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. In the last chapter of his book titled, "White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Unsuturing" he states that the white gaze on Black bodies is a tool of white power, hegemony, and privilege. He asserts that the white gaze is "replete with a racist episteme regarding the Black body" (p. 243). From this, we are to conclude that Black embodiment is heavily exploited in a white, heteropatriarchal, capitalist society.

Take for example when late Black, male designer Virgil Abloh's *kente*-inspired *Louis Vuitton* design was featured on the cover of *Vogue* in April 2021. The gown was worn by the young Black, poet and activist, Amanda Gorman, who came into prominence in January of the same year when she became the youngest presidential inaugural poet in the history of the U.S. The cover received praise and backlash for featuring a *kente* cloth gown stamped with Louis Vuitton initials, in a predominately white fashion publication. Despite the fact that both Abloh and Gorman inhabit Black bodies, the context in which the gown was displayed was problematic. I consider Louis Vuitton, like all luxury brands, historically anti-Black. Abloh was the first Black creative director for the brand in its 167-year history. *Vogue* has been called out for its historical racism in the past. Its editor, Anna Wintour, has been called a "colonial broad" by her former colleague, Andre Leon Talley (2020), and accused of systemic racism at *Vogue* by other Black and Brown creators. Kente cloth is originally a fabric produced by the Asante people of Ghana

and has a history in the anti-colonial struggle (Boateng, 2014). It is now considered a symbol of Black diasporic pride (Boateng, 2014). While Abloh's use of the fabric and Gorman wearing it *has* liberatory potential considering their African American and Black heritage, the purported veracity of the photograph by a white-owned and white-operated fashion business staking a claim on the hypervisibility of two Black "celebrities" denies the image's liberatory promise.

There are many contemporary instances of the exploitation of Black embodiment in popular culture. In the wake of state-sanctioned violence against Black people in the news and on social media, a critical analysis of Black embodied representation has become pressing. It appears that while society loves Black culture (to appropriate and commodify), it does not love Black people. What the capitalist society loves, rather, is "Black cool." "Black cool" can be conceptualized as a branch of Black cosmology that expresses itself through particular aesthetics, mannerisms, and movements. The societal obsession with "Black cool" is an extension of racial fetishism, exoticism, or Othering. Franz Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White masks,* states that "it is The Other who corroborates [the white man] and his search for self-validation" (p. 213). Essentially, Fanon suggests that there is a psychosocial connection between white people and Black people and that white people have a racial attachment to Black people. It is debated whether this attachment is a colonial bond that is paternalistic and narcissistic, or it is a calculated maneuver to feign some kinship with Black people to assuage white guilt for historical violence. Regardless, the preoccupation with Black people and Black embodiment is evident in commercial marketplaces. As Rebecca Walker (2012) suggests in her edited collection of essays, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, there are aspects of Black cool that should only be internalized by Black people, and not consumed by white people, because Black cool is a powerful cultural legacy of embodied survival in a society that does not want Black people to

live and thrive. Because “Blackness” is considered cool, though, we see rampant exploitation of it in the fashion-industrial complex and adjacent commercial enterprises. This exploitation is for capital gain; it does not benefit the cause of Black liberation. Commodifying “Blackness” furthers a colonial agenda. Furthermore, when white people commodify Black embodiment, it does not remedy their internalized white supremacy. It only further promotes colorblind and ahistorical racism. I am convinced that a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing approach to Black embodiment is the only reparative way forward. I address decoloniality in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Decolonizing methodologies

Two theoretical frameworks shape my approach to archival content analysis, a Black feminist-womanist worldview, which I have explained in the literature review for coherent storying, and decolonizing methodologies. These frameworks complement each other because like a womanist worldview, decolonizing and spirituality are inextricably linked. Dei (2002) suggests that the outer and inner selves are connected through understandings of spirituality. Native/Indigenous spirituality is seen as a vital aspect of knowledge and rejects the idea that a hegemonic power is the sole provider and authenticator of knowledge. In a decolonizing agenda, spirituality is seen as transformative and verifies understandings of people's relationships to land, the cosmos, and spiritual traditions embodied in healing and ceremonial practices (Iseke, 2013). Centering the spiritual is considered a decolonizing practice (Iseke, 2013).

Decolonizing methodologies are an integral part of the process of decolonization. Decolonization is understood as "cultural, psychological, and economic freedom for Native/Indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty — the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems" (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021, para. 4). It is the undoing of colonialism. Colonialism is a historical and ongoing global project where settlers continue to occupy land, dictate social, political, and economic systems, and exploit Native/Indigenous people and their resources and Black people's labor. It is a global endeavor and numerous Native/Indigenous and

Black activists and scholars have been engaged in decolonizing work for centuries. Despite this, a German economist, Moritz Julius Bonn (1873–1965), is credited with establishing the term as an academic concept. In his entry on "Imperialism" for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* published in 1932, he explicitly refers to decolonization: "All over the world a period of counter colonization began, and decolonization is rapidly proceeding" (Bonn, 1932, p. 612).

Both Native/Indigenous and Black scholars (Freire, 1976; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1990; Smith, 1999; Péan, 2021) have contributed to academia's conceptualization of decolonization under the collective understanding of "Black liberation and Indigenous Sovereignty." In the U.S. and other colonized areas that are implicated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Native/Indigenous and Black people have unique and intimately connected histories which is how collective decolonizing agendas have come to be. In academia, a collective decolonizing agenda was advanced by Paulo Freire's (1976), *Education as a Practice of Freedom*. He supported a "society that is increasingly decolonized, that increasingly cuts the chains that made it, and that makes it remain the object of others, which they are subjected to" (Freire, 1976, p. 35). He also wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and situates the work of liberation in the minds of the oppressed as opposed to Fanon's (1963) *Wretched of the Earth,* which positioned the work of liberation in the particularities of colonization, between the Native and settler. Their intellectual debate fostered more scholarship on decolonization. In 1984, Audre Lorde wrote an essay: The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in which she denounced white feminism for being complicit with patriarchy by not acknowledging "marginal" women's experiences and called for alternative ways of being. She said,

> those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor,

> who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older; know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (p. 2)

By honing on this, she envisioned self-determination outside of colonial formations.

bell hooks (1990), in "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," envisions marginality as a locus of resistance and decolonization. She asserts that marginality is something that those that are oppressed should not want to lose but protect because it nourishes their capacity to resist and imagine alternatives and a better world. She also reminds us that this sense of marginality comes from lived experiences, a characteristic of embodiment. Similarly, Kristie Dotson (2018), in "On the Way to Decolonization in a Settler Colony: Re-introducing Black Feminist Identity Politics," offers an alternative to the settler-colonial state by centering Black feminist embodiment. She posits that Black feminist embodiment resists historical unknowing that facilitates settler futurity. She suggests that centering Black feminist embodiment is a way to decolonize and keep the imagination open for a decolonial future. Rachelle Péan (2021), in "Talks with my Ancestors," reflects on her journey of healing racial trauma. She references unlearning both external and internal colonialism and centering African spiritual practices, yoga, and reiki. She posits that living in a constant state of destabilization and ongoing imperialism, requires re-experiencing embodied practices that were utilized before colonization.

Indigenous scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, cites many Black activists and scholars, and offers various ways to ensure that research on Native/Indigenous [and Black] people is respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful. One of the most imperative of these ways is to appropriately "approach cultural protocols, values, and behaviors as an integral part of methodology" (p. 16). That is,

centering Native/Indigenous and Black ways of knowing. At times, this means that research on or about Native/Indigenous and/or Black subjects should be conducted by researchers of that respective group. She also states that using a decolonizing methodology is a process that engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. Understanding the legacy of colonialism, the brutalization of humans and their bodies, and histories (including contested histories) is essential for a project of decolonization. I attempt to attend to the specifics of Black women's liberation with a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing framework by acknowledging that colonization and anti-Blackness are linked. My understanding of decolonization hinges on three virtues: (1) sovereignty (2) narrative counter-stories, and (3) psychological healing from the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Archival research requires one to excel at preserving, organizing, and making good use of sources. According to Moore et al. (2017), the "archive of the other archive" is a compilation of rewritings that add up to the researcher's meta-archive. The "archive of the other archive" is "focused around a question or topic to be addressed primarily by archival means, with rewritings gathered as a support" (p. 38). My archive, as a researcher, are digital notes (saved in my phone and laptop) and reference lists as well as computer files, stored digital images, and article drafts. Some of these rewritings have turned into formal writings such as articles and invited commentaries (Covington and Medvedev, 2019; Covington, 2020; Covington, 2022) and art installations and conference presentations (Curative: Confronting and Healing the Fashion-Industrial Complex, 2023; The Intersections of Systemic Racism and Sustainability within the Fashion-industrial Complex, 2020; The Refashioning of Blaxploitation: Identity, Fashion, and Mainstream Commercialization, 2020; The History of Cotton, 2021). As I continue to compile an "archive of the other archive," I realize, as Moore et al. (2017) point out, that my account of the past results from present-day intellectual and disciplinary concerns. The "now/past" companion to the "archive of the archive" has prompted me to approach my archival work through rhetorical accretion. Rhetorical accretion is the process of layering present-day materials over and around original archival materials to create discovery (Collins, 1999). Because Black women's history, cultural production, and embodiment concerns have emerged in response to different types and

levels of oppressions, the archival materials build upon each other to connect to contemporary concerns. As I collect more of an "archive of the archive," I arrange my rewritings by theme. My organizational system is arranged by archive and collection. I depend on an excel spreadsheet with archive location, collection, boxes, and a weblink if applicable to keep the materials orderly. I also utilize saved folders on flash drives of primary sources for reference, photocopies, and relevant images organized by theme.

In archival research, the archive can be conceptualized as several different spaces. The archive-as-institution focuses on the institutional aspect of the archive and how the conceptual space is defined. This means the physical building, but also the institutionalized rules, regulations, and norms that dictate how archival work is practiced. The archive-as-preservation emphasizes how documents and artifacts are processed, preserved, and accessed within the archive. Archive-as-perseveration suggests a focus on who is represented or has access. Lastly, the archive-as-action refers to the ways a researcher works within the archive. This refers to how the researcher approaches the archive. To view the archive only in terms of one of the three or without accounting for the positionality of the researcher threatens the quality of archival research. I acknowledge all levels of the archive and center my positionality and my theoretical approaches in my analysis.

The foundation of traditional archival methodology is influenced by colonialism and imperialism (Genovese, 2016). The ways in which the archives are conceived and utilized has created a hegemonic environment that directly influences how archivists and researchers interact with sources in the archives. The hegemonic environment is the result of colonial and racist foundations that systematically devalues the self-worth, culture, and history of the colonized. Effective decolonization requires a radical lens to analyze archival sources. An interdisciplinary

approach undergirds my theorization which synthesizes my understanding of archival materials through a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing lens. Although my main sources are visual images, I draw from evidence taken from a variety of data sources including biographies, film, historical documents, public records, and personal papers to add context to my analysis. It is impossible for me to avoid or offer a remedy for all questions around archival analysis. However, I aim to add to archival discourse by illuminating a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing archival canon. My methodology questions the nature of archives, their relationship to Black cultural production, material culture, images, and embodied practices, and the challenges of safeguarding the legacies of Black people whose documents are housed in the archives.

I analyze my primary sources from the archives using Mills and Mills' (2011) three-step method for reference: a) making sense of the materials; b) analyzing the materials' use in their historical context, and c) situating the materials and connecting them to their social impact in the present. Conducting the research, the focus of analysis shifts fluidly from the materials themselves to the background information, i.e., how they were produced, used, and communicated/commercialized. This approach is especially important as it relates to visual images, Black cultural production, and visual intelligence. Jordanova (2012) explains visual intelligence as the "skillful processes involved in making items of visual and material culture, and as a prompt to consider the mental activities involved in designing and producing artefacts and thinking them through" (p. 70). Material culture does not exist by accident, nor does it exist in a vacuum; it arises from intentional human production. Because Black cultural production originates from particular racialized experiences, it is important to think about images of Black women in their precise context. As Ames and Schlereth (1985) suggest in *Material Culture: A*

Research Guide, fundamental components of material culture are the way people hold their bodies in images and the clothing they put over these bodies in images. Therefore, a critical visual content analysis is appropriate for my project particularly because of the subject matter. Critical visual content analysis involves identifying the ways in which the features of visual design work to position both the subject/s of the images and the viewer, and to expose the ways in which dominant and 'taken-for-granted' views of the world are legitimated (Walton & Dixon, 2020). Critical visual analysis is necessarily a subjective and interpretive exercise that takes into account the positionality of the analyst. In Tamara Walker's (2017) article, "Black Skin, White Uniforms: Race, Clothing, and the Visual Vernacular of Luxury in the Andes," she uses critical visual content analysis to highlight the utility of visual culture to the understanding of discourses of race. She uses 18th and 19th century images to critically analyze a 2011 Hola! Magazine image in which a wealthy white Columbian family is pictured with their Black servants in the foreground. She finds that such images are reminders of Black people as political subjects. Her study speaks to the importance of critically analyzing the archives, particularly images of Black women.

I adopt an art historical approach to dissecting pictorial representations. Images present a visual narrative, conveying a story or meaning through the channel of sight. The narratives are fabled to tell a truth, an unaltered vision of the artists' or subjects projected thoughts. However, the viewer participates in the storying of images based on their life experiences and positionality. To lessen Eurocentric diffusionist thought from storying Black women's imagery, bodies, and liberatory practices, I inject a Black feminist-womanist canon to the analysis. The photos I choose for analysis are specially curated and selected based on my particular experience of them

and attempt to narrativize and story Black women's bodies in a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing way.

Narrativizing the Images

My narrativization of the images seeks to explore "alternative" ways in which to "read" resistance within, on, and around the body itself. I reference the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal readings of the women's bodies, *just for reference*, and go beyond those readings for a decolonial storying. I look at the images from a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing theoretical positioning. By doing so, the images become a tool of intervention into racist discourses. I recontextualize and call attention to the wider political implications of the women's performances in the images. My narrativization of the images resists hegemony and goes beyond reified conceptions of what it means for a Black woman to be liberated. Instead of flattening the women's legacy to that of mere beauty, fashion icon or representative (or not representative) of Black femininity, the Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing reading conveys an emotive and affective response against the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy.

I am not too concerned with how the images would be read/narrativized outside of the Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing paradigm. Instead, this dissertation is a purposeful critique of that narrative. The point of this meditation is to envision Black women's bodies despite of and outside of the "isms" society has plagued them with. I am most interested in the liberatory potential of the images and the subjects' ability to radiate joy and pleasure through their bodies towards liberated modes of existence. I am only fractionally interested in their

ability to suffer and endure pain within the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy that plagued their lives.

I recognize that there are many different versions of the images that I look to, online and housed in other archives, however, I analyze only the particular images that I provide in the text. Other images from the same event or photoshoot offer different vantage points that might in turn offer different analysis of the image. For the scope of the dissertation, I do not look to these images, so my analysis is only based on the image provided by the archive I searched.

Case Studies

My case studies engage with Black women from the Harlem Renaissance onward who negotiated living, working, and being in historically white spaces. Their professional positions were/are in important social spheres that intersect, in some way, with the fashion-industrial complex. The women are relatively well-known in Black (popular) culture. Their narratives offer a rich investigation of mediated bodies. I investigate not only how their bodies are captured in photography. I also identify the producers of the images, if available. In addition, I explore the ideologies supporting or challenging the narratives scripted onto the visual images. I also attend to the women's biographical considerations to add context to the ways in which their cases demonstrate and critique the narrative that masculinist and white supremacist epistemologies have assigned to their bodies.

I examine three women's images in detail, Katherine Dunham, Angela Davis, and Grace Jones because of the ways in which they use their bodies for liberatory practice. Because I employ Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing thought for the analysis, I also investigate how Black women have freed themselves from mental and psychological bondage despite the violence that their bodies continued to endure in society. In selecting my cases, I rely on

sociological introspection. Sociological introspection is a methodological strategy of recollecting thoughts and feelings of particular life experiences and interpreting those experiences considering their sociohistorical context (Ellis, 2008). As a dancer, yoga practitioner, and fashion scholar, I have drawn on the knowledge of my own lived experiences to determine which cases and images to examine. Historically, images have been used as a medium to exploit, denigrate, and misrepresent the Black body. Even in instances in which Black people yield the power in image production, the white gaze still asserts conditioned assumptions. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to recognize the history of Black women's histories as integral in the interpretation of the images.

For each case, I follow the women's careers and highlight three images. I select each image based on my emotional response and experience with the image. Images are a tool of memory and the transmission of emotions (Gimeno-Ugalde, 2014). Photographic images trigger emotions, help us remember the past, and provide a pathway to access our memory. They enable us in the present to materialize the past and connect to our own experiences and memories. While in the archives, if an image evoked a particular memory or conjured some special feeling, I selected the photo for further analysis.

In each image, I aim to analyze, if possible, the full body for body contour, gaze, posture, perceived movement, dress, and color scheme, with attention to the historical context in which the image was created. I select images in which the women are the main subject, to focus on their unique corporeal narrative. The images picture each woman engaged in her everyday "work." The pictures come from a variety of archival depositories. I analyze the images to trace symbolism of anti-colonization through examples of Black liberatory praxis (dress and/or perceived movement). I survey the archival data to identify manifestations of Black liberatory

affirming actions—where Blackness (including Black cool) was intentionally centered to illustrate how Black women have used their bodies to gain corporeal liberation in systems in which they were not necessarily "free." I survey the data for instances in which the women I study may have been active participants in oppressive systems (commodified in advertising, for example) but exude a measure of alternative liberatory potential. Body liberation is rooted in the Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing epistemological traditions, which are both premised on the idea that lived experiences and bodies are credible sources of knowledge claims. Through my analysis, I find that Black women's embodied experiences in the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy offer revolutionary insights on how to resist extreme oppression in daily life, what I call the somatics of joy and pleasure and are what I consider a unique Black femme liberatory praxis.

CHAPTER 5

KATHERINE DUNHAM

The first woman that I meditate on is Katherine Dunham. Dunham was a performer and choreographer that introduced African and Caribbean dance movements to the American public. She was also a scholar at the University of Chicago, where she became one of the first Black female students to earn a bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree in anthropology (Golus, 2016). Considered the "matriarch of Black dance," she was the first to introduce Black diasporic dance as an art form to the West (Golus, 2016).

Dunham was born in a Chicago hospital on June 22, 1909, to a Black father and a French-Canadian and American Indian mother (Das, 2017). Her mother died when Katherine was a child, and her paternal aunt raised her for a few years until her father remarried. According to Dunham's autobiography, *A Touch of Innocence*, her stepmother was benevolent and encouraged her to pursue dance in her teens (Dunham, 1980). In high school, Dunham joined the Teripschorean Club and began to learn free-style modern dance (Dunham, 1980). She studied ballet with Ludmilla Spereanzeva, one of the first ballet teachers to accept Black dancers as students (Das, 2017). Dunham said of dance,

> You dance because you have to. Dance is an essential part of life that has always been with me. I wasn't concerned about the hardships because I always felt I was doing what I had to do, what I wanted to do, and what I was destined to do. (Dunham, 1978)

She describes her relationship with dance as a calling. Dance was something she was called to do, and despite any hardships or struggle, dance allowed her to persevere.

While attending college, Dunham took a class in anthropology with a professor who specialized in American Indian and African cultures. She learned that Black culture originated in Africa from him and decided to major in anthropology and focus on the dances of the African diaspora (Das, 2017). African diasporic dance denotes dances and dance traditions that Africans brought with them and passed on to their descendants during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and later voluntary migrations (Defrantz & Presto, 2019). In African diasporic or Black dance, the body is transformed through gestures of rhythm, timing, and ancestral memory across time and geographies (Welsh et al., 2019). More than simply moving the body, Black dance has always held a crucial place in freedom struggles, demonstrating a close connection with the ancestral legacy of joy and pleasure (Welsh et al., 2019). On the continent of Africa, dance marks life experiences, encourages abundant crops, honors kings and queens, celebrates weddings, marks rites of passage, and other ceremonial occasions (Welsh-Asante, 2004). During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, dances were preserved through oral tradition and later remixed as plantation dances or ring shouts across the Americas and the Caribbean. A ring shout is a form of dance characterized by leader-chorus singing, hand clapping, and the use of other percussions (Thompson, 2014). Dancers typically move in a counterclockwise circle. This dance allowed the enslaved to express themselves without slave masters knowing what they were doing since it was a cultural and spiritual preservation ceremony. The ring shout is highly spirited, and many slave accounts mention how much joy it brought to those who participated (Thompson, 2014). The ring shout has been practiced for many generations and is alive today. Dunham studied the historical uses of dance in the Black diaspora, such as the ring shout (Das, 2017).

In 1935, Dunham, a recipient of a Rosenwald fellowship, studied with acclaimed anthropologist Melville Herskovits and traveled to the Caribbean to research African-based dances

(Perron, 2000). She returned to the U.S. in 1936 after completing rigorous initiation rites to become a *mambo* —a Vodou priestess. She choreographed pieces that reflected Haitian movements and promoted the idea of dance as a form of spiritual ritual. This is hugely significant since Black dancers' art form was often simply regarded as entertainment, burlesque, exotic, or sexy (Thorpe, 1990). The degrading of Black dance has a long history. For example, on slave ships during the Middle Passage, the enslaved were often forced to dance on the slave ship deck (Thompson, 2014). It was a source of entertainment and exploitation for slave masters and a twisted form of foreplay for rape (Goel, 2020). If enslaved people refused to dance, usually naked, they could even be killed (Goel, 2020).

Later, blackface minstrelsy served a similar purpose. Minstrel shows were introduced as burlesque and comic shows in the early 1830s (Lott, 1991), performed by white people in blackface. They started as parodies depicting African descendants' dancing and music performances. In the performances, the body was often grotesquely contorted, even when sitting (Lott, 1991). Themes of racial, sexual, class, and national identities were often prominent in the performances (Gill, 2000). Even after the wane of minstrel shows, Black dance continued to be perceived as mere entertainment and an opportunity to view the Black body as part of a sexualized "Other." Josephine Baker's legacy demonstrates this; her body served as an international iconographic image of sexualized primitivism in the colonial imagination (Cheng, 2008).

Dunham's desire to mix classical and African dance traditions stemmed from her knowledge of the history of Black dance and her personal experiences with classical dance forms and the "negro body" (Strom, 2010). In her biography, she speaks to some of the challenges of working as a Black dancer in classical styles. Not only did Black dancers have a hard time getting their bodies to physically "fit" the mold of Eurocentric body ideals, due to racial segregation, Black

dancers also struggled to find opportunities to expand their training or career (Dunham, 1980). These experiences led Dunham to think that Black people could only fully express themselves through their own dance forms. She used both sartorial expression and dance as somatic processes. In what follows, I turn to archival visual sources to study her embodied practices.

In an image (Fig. 1) from 1943 entitled "Katherine Dunham as woman with cigar from the ballet 'Tropics- Shore Excursions'" from the Jerome Robbins Dance Division archives, Dunham is pictured in an elaborate variation of a *quadrille* dress with a tropical plant pattern. Her sassy demeanor encouraged me to investigate the image more. The front of her dress is hiked up and sumptuous ruffles frame her bare legs. A bustle surrounds her lower torso. The *quadrille* dress is a bespoke folk dress worn in Caribbean countries. In Haitian creole, it is referred to as the *karabela* dress. Haitian women have worn it since

Figure 1

the 18th century; today, it is worn for formal occasions and traditional folk dances (Manuel, 2009). Vodou priestesses also wear the dress in initiation ceremonies. Dunham also wears layered necklaces, and her hair is tied up with a headscarf decorated with an ivory ring. The headwrap in her ensemble is significant. Spiritually, the physical body and head serve as primordial sacred vessels in Vodou, like many other spiritualities. In West African tradition, the head is considered the seat of selfhood (Daniels, 2022). It is closest to heaven, is the source of knowledge, and houses an individual's spirits. Therefore, the head should be covered for spiritual protection (Campbell & Niblett, 2016).

Additionally, the headscarf is a part of traditional Haitian dress brought from Africa. During slavery, it was used by slaveowners to indicate ownership over their human property (Foster, 1997). The headwrap was also used as a manifestation of a sartorial law, which aimed to mark Black and mixed-race women as intrinsically seductive and sexual by virtue of their hair (Willson, 2022). Enslaved and free Black women were known to wear their hair in elaborate styles creating roadmaps and triggering communication amongst themselves (Dabiri, 2020). They incorporated natural elements such as flowers, feathers, and sometimes jewels into their hairstyles (Dabiri, 2020) which meant that they sometimes appeared wealthier or "freer" than they were. As a result, these enticing styles attracted the attention of men, most importantly, white men (Greensword, 2022). The law-enforced headwrap (or *tignon* law in Spanish colonial Louisiana) was intended to parallel free Black women's appearance with that of the headwrap-wearing enslaved. However, free Black women wore towering turbans of Madras, silk, velvet, damask, taffeta, and other luxurious fabrics (Greensword, 2022). Their headwraps accentuated and exaggerated their voluminous curly and kinky hair instead of concealing it. This practice exposed

mixed-race women through their hair texture, alluding to the preponderance of interracial sexual activity and the assumption of Black women's seductiveness.

The headwrap later became a marker of silent resistance. For example, in parts of Central America, like Suriname, Black women used the folds in their headscarves to communicate coded messages to one another that their masters could not understand (Sonson, 2021). Similarly, in the southern and northern U.S., Black women subverted the sartorial law of headwraps by creatively utilizing their wrapped hair for sartorial insurgency and joyful rebellion by various stylizations, including knots, twists, and other elaborate styles of headwraps (Willson, 2022).

In the image, Dunham also holds a cigar in her mouth, which is often used to honor Haitian spirits in ritual ceremonies (Cardeña & Schaffler, 2018). She displays a half smile. She is posed with her hands behind her back while her legs are contorted in movement. Her pose is that of the *Sankofa*. The *Sankofa* is a bird and a Ghanaian concept. The bird has been adopted to symbolize what Black/African American/Africana Studies strive to do. The word *Sankofa* in Akan is translated to mean "go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful" (Temple, 2010). The bird is represented twisting its beak behind itself to bring forth an egg from its back. Dunham mirrors the traditional Sankofa rendering. Her head is slightly turned, and she is looking into the distance. The cigar extends out of her mouth as a bird's beak might. Her dress and pose work as a site for displaying Blackness. Because of the Africana symbols that Dunham displayed, she was forced into the dialectic of a serious (academic and classically trained dancer) versus a sexy (African diasporic dancer and Black woman) performer. Although the white mainstream viewed her as exotic and entertaining, they also categorized her as a "peculiar enigma" (Clark, 1982), negotiating two "conflicting" identities. The image and the context in which Dunham operated illustrate the distinct and layered intersections of gender, race, and sexuality of Black women in

an imperialist, white supremacist, and capitalist heteropatriarchy. Dunham, in the image, indicates that she is well aware of the complex and multilayered meanings of her body as a Black dancer. Through the placement of her body, she honors the ancestral legacy of bodily resistance.

In another image (Fig. 2), which I uncovered in the Library of Congress Archives while searching for films of Dunham's dancing, Dunham is depicted in a pose of ecstasy. The image is from Dunham's first full-length popular ballet, *L'Ag'Ya*. She is performing the *majumba,* the love dance of ancient West Africa (Clark, 1982). Dance is said to be one of the methods used to heal the spirit in Africa (Monteiro & Wall, 2011). In this instance, the spiritual issue is love, perhaps self-love or love of the body. Dunham's facial expression suggests she is in an altered state of consciousness and passion. She appears satisfied. Her eyes are closed, and

Figure 2

her lips, painted in a dark color, are slightly parted. She wears a striped headwrap, a beaded choker, and a thin, almost sheer, cotton *karabela* dress with a simple embroidered trim. The *karabela* dress is often made in various shades of bright colors and patterns. However, the white color of Dunham's dress suggests purity and cleanliness.

The dress she dons is important in Vodou, as is the color white. White clothing is important in lwa/orisha (gods) veneration in Afro-Diasporic belief systems, like Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou (Aderibigbe & Falola, 2022). For example, on Fridays, in Candomblé, practitioners wear white to honor Oxalá, the father of all orishas. Initiates to Santería are required to wear white clothing for a year. White clothing is also standard attire for attendees and participants at Vodou religious ceremonies. The color white is also associated with several Vodou deities. Therefore, perhaps Dunham viewed the *L'Ag'Ya* as a ritual or ceremony in which she could convey reverence on specific aspects of her life.

The scene in which Dunham initially wore this dress features homemakers and Black women gossiping (Clark, 1982). The conscious use of white may be Dunham's commentary on housewives, who appear loyal and pure (because Western marriage is associated with purity, virtue, and loyalty). However, the housewives gossip, which means they are disloyal and untrustworthy. In other words, through the white dresses and performance of the dance, she might have communicated a subversive message that being tied to a man and being married — a traditional Western declaration of womanhood and femininity — is not the sole aspiration of women, particularly Black women. In contrast to the white dress, Dunham's lips are dark colored. The use of dark lipstick, particularly red, conveys attractiveness and sexiness (Stephen & McKeegan, 2010). In direct opposition of white that signifies purity, her dark lips suggest sexiness. Black women have never been able to meet the standard or virtue of purity in white society, so

perhaps Dunham's play on the pure and untrustworthy/sexy alludes to that dichotomy. The use of Black women's bodies to critique white Western womanhood situates the scene in a larger context around what it means to be a married woman, and, more importantly, a Black married woman perpetuating typical stereotypes.

Additionally, the color white is associated with the Suffrage movement and thus has political connotations. It is worth noting that after the 1917 silent parade sparked by the East St. Louis Riots, in which Black people silently protested police brutality and the lynching of Black people (NAACP Administrative File, n.d.), Black women used the color white not only to show their support of the suffrage, but also to project respectability in the public sphere (Alexander, 2019). In Black communities, since the 1900s, white has been used for formal occasions to present a unified presence (Collins & Lewis, 2008). Since Dunham was often presented as exotic and salacious, her use of white might also be interpreted as a call for viewing Black women as moral and respectable, which turns her sartorial choice into a political statement as well as a psychological one, suggesting that one's skin color is no guarantee for morality and righteousness.

The mainstream white public did not recognize Dunham's subtle markers of resistance. For example, in 1940, John Martin of the *New York Times* referred to Dunham's work with a backhanded compliment, "There is nothing pretentious about it: It is not designed to delve into philosophy or psychology but to externalize the impulses of a high-spirited, rhythmic and gracious race." In other words, he and the *New York Times* audience just saw happy Black people dancing around and did not detect her performance's subtle social or political messages. Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing embodiment reading suggests that Dunham dancing the *majumba* in her sartorial choices is a love-infused cultural practice of the body. By dressing herself in a simple thin, white *karabel*a dress and headwrap, Dunham is paying homage to several embodied practices.

She wears a dress that hails from the Caribbean, a place in which she learned African diasporic dance and came closer to her spirituality, an African traditional spirituality. The white cotton dress is also rooted in African cosmologies. The ballet in which she wears the garment is a love story between a man and woman, which she layers into a commentary about marriage, womanhood, and femininity. She also pays tribute to the Black and the suffragette tradition of displaying white on the female body. Contrary to the *New York Times* comment, these readings suggest delving into the psyche and embracing a political self.

The more I explored Dunham's imagery, the more narratives of Blackness, spirituality, joy, and pleasure revealed themselves. In an unknown image from the Southern Illinois University Archives, Dunham is posing topless holding a cigarette in her mouth (Fig. 3). I was most attracted to Dunham's sensual use of her body in this image. Her arms are above her head as she combs her hair, and her breasts are fully exposed. She smirks as she peers down at the

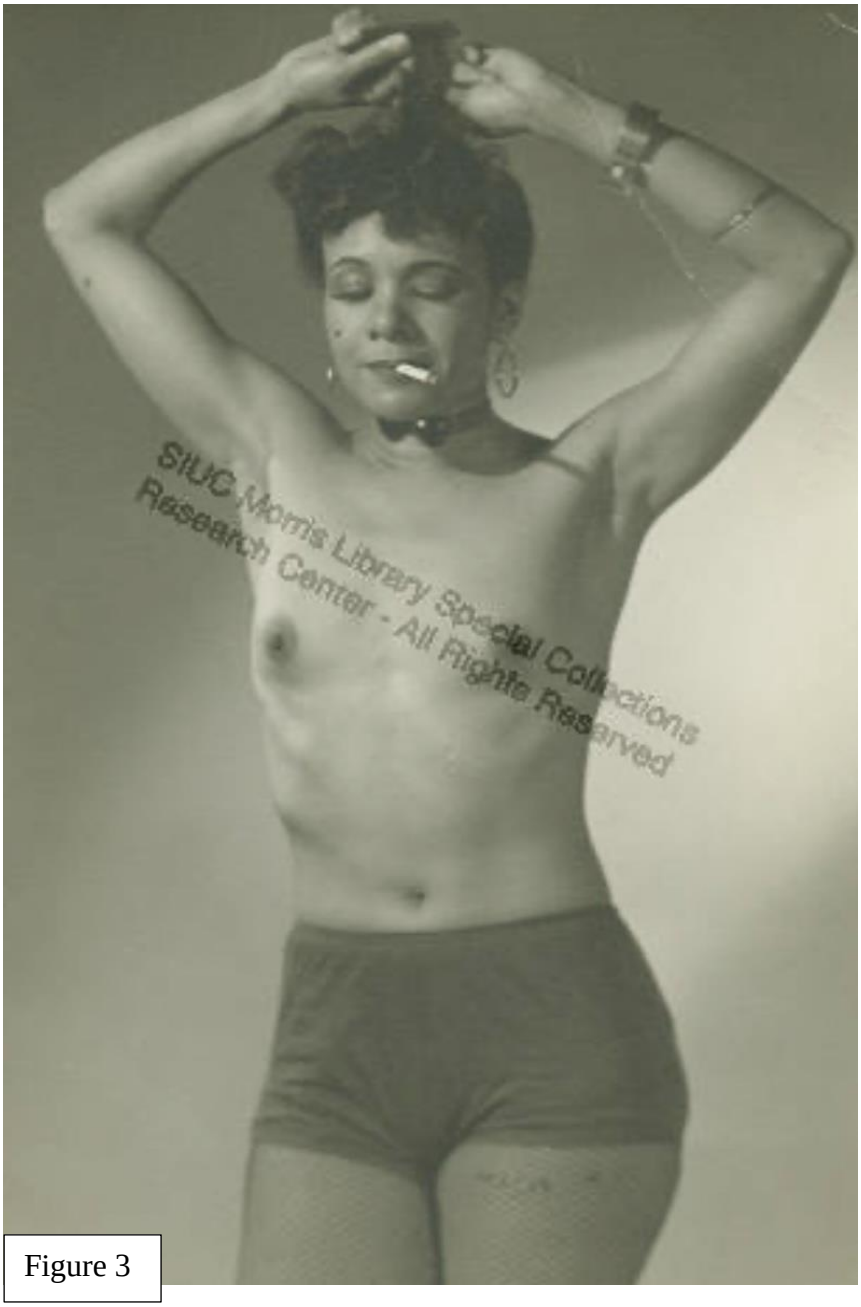

Figure 3

cigarette in her mouth. She has a bracelet on one arm that resembles a handcuff. She wears a choker or collar, perhaps suggesting bondage. Under her shorts, she has fishnet stockings. The sartorial codes of these items, of course, can be read as sexualized. Cigarettes, for example, have been read as phallic symbols of male power and domination (Amos & Haglund, 2000). Dunham's smirk at the white cigarette might suggest a critique of patriarchy, especially white patriarchy. The braceleted handcuff alludes to bondage under slavery. It also suggests dominance and submission, play and work. The choker with a ball enveloping her neck refers to the erotic and BDSM. Fishnet stockings are considered sexy and often serve as paraphernalia of sexual fetishism. Dunham's appearance plays on the sexualized tropes of Black women. In this case, unlike it is the case historically, the erotic reading does not oppress or subjugate Dunham. Instead, it celebrates a body that overcomes racism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy through a curated display of the erotic. In this image, her body is a source of pleasure. She is in charge of her sexuality and her body; she is not victimized.

In Vodou, and other African traditional spiritualities, rituals of trance and possession allow practitioners to understand themselves as embodiments of the divine and thus in tune with their sexual desires and the erotic (Strongman, 2019). The coalescing of human bodies and the divine produce identities outside the colonial imagination of sexes. In Vodou, gender roles do not exist. Men and women share the same responsibilities. Male and female spirits are equally venerated by either sex. Through Dunham's strategy of dressing the part of a sexualized body, mimicry, and masquerade enable resistance to the racialized, gendered, and heteropatriarchal classifications of bodies that characterizes colonial thought of Black women. In a decolonial context, through transcorporeality and the fluidity of the human and the spiritual body (possession during Vodou ritual, for example), a distinct trans-Atlantic understanding of the human psyche, sex, and gender

as multiple, removable, and performative emerges. Through a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing lens, Dunham's image provides a typology of Black femme praxis that includes Black femme play in the face of slavery, colonialism, Caribbean tropicalism, and Orientalism. In this way, Dunham self-fabricates an eroticized image entangled with and outside of colonial binaries of identity.

Dunham sought to illustrate that Black women across the globe are connected through embodied modes. Thus, they could unify politically through a self-assured command of their bodies. Her embodied modes of being were infused with social consciousness. They conveyed a successful processing of trauma caused by oppression. Thus, I read her image as liberatory. Her resistance and commitment to liberation is complex and multifaceted. It is expressed through various embodied modalities: dress, dance, African diasporic spirituality, and sexuality through strategic use of the body. Dunham reaches back into her (known or perceived) African ancestry to retrieve and revive rituals of that heritage (through diasporic embodiments) and transforms them to reach a sense of liberation. This liberation was fueled by spiritual sovereignty. Spiritual sovereignty is the freedom to interpret spirits and spirituality in relationship with one's environment (Donaldson, 2022). Through her spiritual sovereignty, performed through her body, Dunham conveyed a reclamation of the erotic.

CHAPTER 6

ANGELA DAVIS

The next woman that I mediate on is Angela Davis. Angela Davis was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1944. At the time, Birmingham was one of the most racially segregated cities in the country. In fact, Angela's neighborhood was nicknamed "Dynamite Hill" because the Ku Klux Klan often executed bomb attacks on Black homes in the community (Davis, 1988). This meant that Angela was exposed to various forms of racism and activism from an early age (Davis, 1988). Although speaking out about white supremacy and civil rights in Birmingham was incredibly dangerous, Angela's family refused to stay silent. Growing up, her parents participated in several civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, and made sure that Angela attended a progressive school that reinforced the values instilled in her by her parents (Davis, 1988). Her parents were middle-class and were intent to give their daughter a high-quality education. She attended Brandeis University in Massachusetts, the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Berlin, where she studied philosophy with Herbert Marcuse. As a graduate student in California, in the late 1960s, she was associated with several activist groups, including the Che-Lumumba Club, an all-Black branch of the Communist Party. She was hired as a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, but later fired by the school's administration because of her beliefs and Communist affiliation (Davis, 1988).

As an activist and scholar, Davis literally put her body in harm's way by supporting the political agenda of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The BPP was a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Black Power organization, founded in 1966. The Party's platform challenged police

brutality and launched various survival programs to provide community support for education. The BPP also fought for increased access to transportation and medical services and combatted food insecurity (Wilson, 2018). The U.S. government violently repressed the BPP (Wilson, 2018) and Davis was implicated in the FBI's investigation of BPP activities (Davis, 2018). Associated with the BPP, Davis was often pictured in their uniform, which consisted of a signature black turtleneck, leather trench coat, and beret over the tufts of their afros (Cheddie, 2010). The BPP had a pivotal role in adopting new beauty standards and advocated pride in natural Black physical appearance (Cheddie, 2010). The Party encouraged wearing one's hair natural, embraced Afrocentric styles, such as kente cloth and dashikis, and used these to overtly express their radical political stance.

In 1970, while working as an academic and activist, Davis was charged with several crimes, including murder, for her alleged part in the escape of a political prisoner, George Lester Jackson. At the time, she was also fighting a legal battle with California governor, Ronald Reagan, and the state's university regents to retain her position as a professor in the Philosophy Department at UCLA after she refused to renounce her membership in the Che-Lumumba Club of the Communist Party (Davis, 1988). Known as the Marin County Civic Center Attacks, on August 7th, 1970, Jonathan Jackson attempted to free his brother George Jackson, and other political prisoners, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, who were young, politically active Black men and inmates at Soledad Prison. They faced trumped-up charges for the murder of a white prison guard (Sanders, 1971). Davis's guns were used in the botched escape, and, as a result, she was charged with murder and kidnapping in connection with the "attack." Immediately after the events were publicized, she fled in fear for her life. After J. Edgar Hoover placed her on the FBI's Most Wanted List, the mainstream press stopped talking about Davis as a radicalized

professor and intellectual. She became racialized and labeled a “Black militant” (Davis, 1981). In other words, she went from a politically engaged educator to an extremist. This discursive change helped justify the government's “hunt” for Davis, her subsequent incarceration, and the exploitation of her likeness.

When the mainstream press first introduced readers to Angela Davis, they emphasized her “redness” and highlighted her “girliness” rather than her Blackness and womanliness (Roman, 2020). Later, headlines referred to Davis as the “Red Professor,” or “Red Teacher,” and *Time* magazine simply called her “Angela the Red” (Roman, 2020). She was also referred to as a “girl” and not a woman in many news articles (Roman, 2020). The “red” designation may refer to her association with the Communist Party as red was a color and symbol of left-wing politics (Casiraghi et al., 2022). However, it also has racial implications, especially when paired with the term “girl.” The label “red” alludes to Davis’ skin color; she is a light-skinned Black woman. In the southern U.S. if people are phenotypically Black, but have light skin with red undertones, they might be referred to as a “redbone.” In the Jim Crow South, the racial designation of “redbone” was weaponized by the interstate capitalist class to designate some proximity to whiteness, mixed-race, and other power structures (Artz, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the color coding of Davis dramatically changed after Hoover placed her on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. Suddenly, she was talked about as “Black, armed, and dangerous.” Additionally, when someone refers to a Black woman as “girl,” racial and gender discrimination collide. During slavery and in the Jim Crow era, Black adult men were referred to as “boy” and women as “girl” well into adulthood. These labels served as constant, demeaning reminders that Black people were considered infantile and undeserving of respect or proper social positioning (Taylor et al., 2019). The message behind “girl” is that a woman is immature, irresponsible, and not to be taken seriously.

The label makes women to be pictured as innocent, naïve, perhaps delicate, and gentle. However, after Davis was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List, her "girlish" qualities were erased, and her descriptors became "extremely violent" and "dangerous," which historically have been used to describe Black masculine traits (Taylor et al., 2019). Thus, this shift of perception ungendered and, at the same time, masculinized Davis in the public eye.

The terms "Black militant" and "Communist" became more pronounced in press coverage. By the time Davis was put on the FBI's Most Wanted list, the U.S. government had already silenced and killed numerous Black liberation leaders through similar tactics — criminalization through the press (Davis, 1981). J. Edgar Hoover was known to have had a decades-long history of harassing, incarcerating, and neutralizing Black liberation leaders such as Marcus Garvey, Claudia Jones, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X (Roman, 2020). Because the press reasserted Davis's Blackness, her body was rendered "criminally" Other, which justified the government's hunt for her and subsequent incarceration. Although Communism was also associated with violence and radicalism in the white U.S. imagination, the trope of Blackness equated with criminality and violence has a longer history and even greater weight within the white American imagination. Thus, Davis's image became one of violence and criminality for the white American public.

Davis (1994) writes about her image during her trial in "Afro images: Politics, fashion and nostalgia." She reflects on her objectification; she was reduced to parts of her body, namely her hair. She muses on how it was depoliticized during and after the trial stating:

> The distinction of being known as "the Afro" is largely a result of a particular economy of journalistic images in which mine is one of the relatively few that has survived the last two decades. Or perhaps the very segregation of those photographic images caused mine

> to enter into the then dominant journalistic culture precisely by virtue of my presumed criminality. In any case, it has survived, disconnected from the historical context in which it arose, as fashion. (Davis, 1994, p. 38)

Davis goes on to explain that, on the one hand, she was portrayed as a conspiratorial and monstrous Communist, an anti-American, whose unruly natural hairdo symbolized Black militancy and anti-whiteness, while, on the other hand, she was portrayed as a charismatic and raucous revolutionary ready for war (Davis, 1994). She rejected both portrayals. As it is customary with most Black women, the public did not know how to read Davis. She resided at an "interstice" as Spillers (1987) reminds us, a structural gap.

Following her arrest and two-year imprisonment, Davis was acquitted of all charges. During her incarceration, Davis started practicing yoga to care for her mind, body, and spirit. In a 1975 article in *Ebony* magazine entitled "Yoga: Something for Everyone," Davis spoke with journalist Stanley Williford about how yoga helped her increase her bodily health and develop internal awareness. She said:

> Just the physical part was a help, in my case, because I couldn't leave the cell for regular exercise. I have never used yoga as an end in itself but merely as a means to prepare myself for a more effective struggle. As a result of yoga, I am more energetic. I am able to go and appeal to people and to organize them to do the kinds of things that are vital to our freedom. (Williford, 1975, p. 97)

Davis's use of yoga to maintain her physical and mental well-being while incarcerated suggests that physical endurance, spiritual wellness, and liberation are strongly linked. She also said in a recorded interview for the organization Afro Punk in 2018:

> For a long time, activists did not necessarily think that it mattered to take care of themselves; in terms of what they eat, in terms of mental self-care, corporeal self-care, spiritual self-care …. I know that there were some people who emphasized it...I'm thinking about one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, Ericka Huggins, who began to practice yoga and meditation in the 70s, and she encouraged many people, including Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, to join that practice.

Despite the violence that the body endures, the collective awareness of the self that Davis talks about regarding the body and a spiritual dimension, indicates that Black embodiment was part of a radical social justice discourse that she adopted. Consequently, instead of residing at an "interstice," through a decolonizing and Black feminist-womanist reading, her images can be interpreted as a unique manifestation of Black femme praxis utilizing the somatics of joy and pleasure.

In the image (Fig. 4) which I came across in the Chapman University Frank Mt. Pleasant Library of Special Collections and Archives while searching the UCLA database, Angela Davis is pictured speaking behind bulletproof glass at Madison Square Garden in New York. Leroy

Figure 4

Henderson, a Black professor of photography, photographed the image. I was most attracted to Davis' purple dress, which alludes to Alice Walker's poetic definition of womanism, "womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender." I later discovered that the image was initially black and white and only colorized later. Nonetheless, the purple dress is a stark reminder of Davis's allegiance to Black women. The image entitled, "New York: Black militant Angela Davis speaks to crowd at Madison Square Garden June 29th" was taken during "An Evening with Angela Davis," which was part of several nationwide appearances to help her defray the cost of her then recent California trial on murder and conspiracy charges (Davis, 1981). Davis is standing behind a podium in a bulletproof booth, flanked by two attendees, a man, and a woman, who hold up the bulletproof glass. Speaking from behind a bulletproof glass pane was a necessary precaution at the time, as Davis feared assassination (Davis, 1981).

In the image, Davis wears a lavender, peasant-style dress in a popular silhouette of the time. The neckline is plunged, and the sleeves of the dress are ruched at the wrists. Her neck is bare; she wears no necklace. Her ears, too, lack jewelry. Her hair is styled in her signature afro. Although her attire is simple, she looks radiant and has an air of glamour. Her sole "accessory" is the bulletproof booth with three impenetrable glass panels that surround the front and sides of her. Another large panel protects her back. The only openings are where her attendees stand. The female attendee is on Davis's left. She also sports a large afro and is dressed in a greenish-brown earth-colored dress in African print. She is watching Davis as she speaks. The male attendee is on Davis's right. His afro is shorter but noticeable. He also wears an earth brown ensemble, a patterned short-sleeve shirt, and brown chinos. He faces the audience and is scrutinizing it as Davis is speaking. Davis, on the pulpit, stands out like a purple flower in earth-toned soil. The image is powerful but relatively simple. Davis's corporeal performance is what makes it

complex. It is easy to see that she is performing Black femininity as a corporeal strategy. Her aesthetic plays on and subverts the tropes of her public image.

Firstly, Davis was conscious that her afro symbolized her politics. The unprocessed state of her hair spoke volumes about Black women's beauty politics and what it meant to be "modern," "natural," and "feminine" in the age of the burgeoning global Black Freedom movement. Specifically, because Davis experienced a dramatic shift in how the public viewed her, her orchestrated sartorial choices come across as deliberate, especially her conscious projection of Black femininity. Traditional femininity has typically been conceptualized from a Eurocentric perspective (Hill Collins, 2000). For example, according to Eurocentric beauty standards, fair skin, long hair, and a petite frame might indicate femininity. Femininity might be defined as beliefs deemed as appropriate roles and behaviors for women under heteropatriarchy.

Davis initially met at least some of the mainstream guidelines of femininity. Although a Black woman, she has fair skin. She is also an intellectual, which is a respectable occupation. Her Black power aesthetic, visually communicated through her afro and her radical politics were sometimes overlooked by the white mainstream because her appearance aligned with white Eurocentric aesthetics of femininity. However, her proximity to ideal white femininity waned when she became too "loud," more radical, and expressed public solidarity with Black men. She seems conscious of this and, at times, plays with her presentation by dressing rather feminine while also emphasizing the aesthetics of Black radicalism. She highlights the challenges of Black womanhood in the image, such as the constant fear of state-sanctioned death pronounced by the bulletproof shield surrounding her and the need for community protection.

In another image (Fig. 5) from 1974 by Bernard Gotfryd, which I discovered at the Library of Congress Archives, Davis is seated in a black chair. According to the archival material, the half-length portrait is marked with "x's" to indicate Gotfryd's or a publishing editor's selection of the photo for printing or use. Davis may have been on a panel, listening when the photo was taken. She dons her signature afro and a black turtleneck. Unlike in Figure 4, Davis wears jewelry to accessorize her outfit in this image. Hoop earrings suspend from her ears. It is important to note that Black women have worn hoop earrings for centuries. So, they are markers of Black pride and beauty aesthetics.

Figure 5

Hoop earrings originated around 2500 B.C.E in the Nubian civilization in present-day Sudan (Garcia, 2018). Through trade, they were later adopted by ancient Egyptians (Guerra & Pagès-Camagna, 2019). Men, women, kings, and queens adorned themselves with hoop earrings to enhance their beauty and sexuality (Hartwig, 2015). As time went on, however, there was a decline in the use of elaborate ear jewelry in Black cultures, which made room for intricate hairstyles instead. There was a resurgence of the hoop earrings during the Black Power and

Women's Rights movements of the 1960s and 70s as a nod to a return to Afrocentric feminine aesthetics. In the image, Davis embraces this trend. She also wears a nose ring in her left nostril. Nose rings, too, originate in the Global South. Nose rings were commonly used by African tribes and in India by women to signify coming of age (Henley & Porath, 2021; Waterman et al., 2010). They also showed wealth and beauty (Waterman et al., 2010). Davis's nose ring pays homage to a cultural legacy but is also a marker of rebellion and counterculture. In the 70s, in a western context, facial piercings challenged femininity (Hoskin, 2017). Instead of normative body constructs of perfection and womanhood, piercing is a different marker; by its use, Davis balances the feminine and unfeminine. The piercing is in her left nostril. In many parts of the Global South, the left nostril symbolizes the female reproductive system. Thus, the piercing communicates engagement with and embracing issues of womanhood, such as menstruation and childbirth (Ladizinski, 2013). Spiritually, a piercing in the left nostril alleviates pain in one's life and protects from evil (Paratpar, 2020), which are both concepts that would align with Davis's corporeal strategy.

In the image, Davis also wears a beaded medallion necklace. The necklace is reminiscent of both an Indigenous and African motif, as it represents the sun. In both mythologies, the sun represents power and authority (Kreamer et al., 2012; Mcpherson, 2012). The sun symbol can be a daily reminder of one's empowerment and strength. In the image's background, the contour of South America can be seen on the wall behind Davis. Davis may have been on a panel or giving a talk about Black communities in South America or its politics. Her image in the front and of the continent suggests her allegiance to indigeneity and the African diaspora. Latin America's Indigenous population was significantly decreased during colonization, and significant numbers of Black populations live in South America. The Pan-African movement, which took root among

the African diaspora, sought to unify all people of African origin for advancement and liberation (Adi, 2018). It was a political movement that used dress and the body to visualize its ideas (Ford, 2016). South America in the background of the image serves as a reminder of Davis's transnational work to unify Indigenous, Black, and all "third world" people. In the image, Davis's sartorial symbols along with the map behind her illustrate the play and performance of the Black femme body in liberatory strife.

Figure 6 is an image from the New School Archives and Special Collections in New York. The photo was in a collection of images of guest speakers and performers at The New School in the 70s. Davis's image is from September 1975. The back of the image was stamped and read "Stanley Seligson Photographer." It also included a New York address. Seligson seems to have been a photographer that the school commissioned, as there were several other photographs in the collection with the same stamp. In Seligson's image, Davis is posted at a podium and speaks to an audience. A part of a microphone is captured on the left of the image. Davis is seen from

Figure 6

profile with her afro framing the side of her face. Her left hoop earring barely peers from under her hair, and a fleck of light makes her nose ring visible. She wears glasses, the symbol of an intellectual. There has been an association between wisdom and spectacles or glasses since antiquity, particularly in the western world (Amoako, 2020). Glasses signify intellectual pursuits. In the previous two images, Davis does not wear them. Knowing that this image was taken at a university speaking engagement, Davis likely made a conscious decision to wear them. Despite her already well-known educational pursuits and academic achievements, because of her distorted image in the American public, she likely felt she had to overtly perform the intellectual and support it with sartorial cues.

Davis's clothing is more formal and toned down in this image than in the others. She wears a light-colored turtleneck instead of the black one associated with the BPP. She layers a short, dark patterned flower or leaf vest over the turtleneck. It appears that she is wearing slacks. Here, again, Davis performs her multiple identities. As described in my analysis of Katherine Dunham, the Black femme intellectual is an inexplicable body. In Davis's case, this enigma was exacerbated by her "extreme" politics. In the eyes of American society, not only was Davis an intelligent Black woman, but she was also "violent and dangerous." Davis was keenly aware of these ascriptions to her body but did not relinquish her Black aesthetic. Figure 6 portrays her smartly dressed, combining traditionally male and female dress items. Her composure and outfit suggest that we can trust her and, in turn, the ideas she introduces to her audience. Her appearance can be interpreted as a subtle, nonconfrontational protest and resistance.

Davis signifies that the body can be a powerful tool for self-expression, solidarity, and political defiance. As I was examining the image, I thought: Is the white public less afraid of the Black radical when she is dressed as an intellectual? Instead of the bulletproof enclosure she

once used to demonstrate necropolitics in action, Davis now uses her body and clothing in place of armor against ill-informed notions targeting her.

Angela Davis's body was and still is deprecated and politicized by hegemonic forces. She actively worked for material liberation and used her body as a canvas of mental liberation. She emphasized her politics through her aesthetic and often displayed her mental sovereignty. Dominant culture molds our thoughts and behavior against our interests. Davis, a middle-class and well-educated Black woman, who, despite what dominant culture told her she should be or look like, actively used her body to visualize a Black radical femme praxis. She stated that she had used her mental capacity to free herself from literal bondage in prison. Even everyday acts such as dressing the body are mediated through hegemonic constructs and constraints. However, Davis liberated herself from certain aspects of social conditioning, including that a Black woman intellectual cannot be radical. She also contested notions of how a Black woman should dress. Davis's mental sovereignty removed the locus of control exerted over her and dismantled the illegitimate authority and grip of the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal society from her body.

CHAPTER 7

GRACE JONES

The last woman that I discuss is Grace Jones. Fashion model and disco star Grace Jones utilized her body to highlight Black fashion and art to the global world. Jones began her modeling career in New York City. Later she also worked in Paris for fashion houses such as Yves St. Laurent and Kenzo and appeared on the covers of *Elle* and *Vogue*. She worked with famous photographers such as Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin, and Hans Feurer. She became known for, what the white mainstream considered, an "exotic," distinctive androgynous appearance with bold features.

Through her modeling career, she became a style icon in the 1970s and 80s. Her appearance was often crafted by her French artist lover and fashion photographer, Jean-Paul Goude. In 1977, Jones embarked on a music career, securing a record deal with Island Records, and becoming a star of New York City's Studio 54-centered disco scene. Grace has been vocal about the sexual harassment and racism she faced in the fashion and music industries. In the documentary, *Bloodlight and Bami*, about her life and career, she discusses and stories how she had to fight sexism and racism to achieve creative freedom and sovereignty over her career.

Jones was born in Jamaica to a family of Christian clerics. Religion was a tangible reminder of the colonial system in both her family life and Jamaica. In her biography, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, she recalls that clerics were called "masters." On account of this, she said, "Master, *massa*, [is]a name rooted in the history of slavery itself, [it originates] from the masters of the estate" (Jones & Morley, 2015, p. 17). Recounting her life story, she chronicles how she

thought of religion as slavery and notes that strict religious ideals dictated her appearance and ways of being. When her family moved to New York City for better job opportunities, she became a rebellious teenager and began to fashion her body to oppose her religious upbringing. She says, “I couldn’t even wear open-toed shoes. Being nude was my response. I was born. I was reborn” (p. 61). Despite rejecting her religious upbringing, Jones centers God and the spirit in her ways of being. She said in an audio interview in 2015, “I believe in God, everything I see is part of God, but not in *that* way” (Ellen, 2015, para 10). Her career and work can be considered a somatic guide on embodying an existence outside of hegemony through using dress and her body.

Figure 7

In a 1979 photograph by Jean-Paul Goude for *Vogue Italia* (Fig 7.), Jones is featured in a fashion shot. However, her image is in direct opposition to dominant white narratives of Black women in fashion and beauty. For centuries,

mainstream media rarely represented Black women as beautiful, although Black women's beauty was valued in Black communities. When Black women were depicted as beautiful, they were hypersexualized (hooks, 2015). I have already pointed this out in connection with Josephine Baker in Chapter Five. The portrayal of Black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptors associated with the stereotype include seductive, alluring, exotic, beguiling, tempting, and lewd (hooks, 2015). Unlike white women who were mostly portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, modesty, and sexual purity, Black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory in white mainstream media. This depiction of Black women is signified by the Jezebel archetype, evidenced by Black enslaved and free women deemed seductive because of their hair, the "lusty moor" iconography, and, more contemporarily, through female representations in Blaxploitation films (Lomax, 2018). Jezebel signifies Black women's bodies as sites of sexual deviation, a colonial and racist perception.

Another portrayal of Black women favored those who had more Eurocentric features. However, in the 1910s and 1920s and later in the 1960s and 1970s, social movements fostered strong critiques of Black aesthetics and beauty practices deemed Eurocentric (Ford, 2016). The widespread Black practice of hair straightening, and skin lightening was heavily criticized. In the late 1960s, the "Black is Beautiful" movement became well-known, and the fashion industry hugely profited from it. The 1979 image of Grace Jones for *Vogue Italia* serves as commentary on the Jezebel trope, and the Black is Beautiful movement. The Italian edition of *Vogue* magazine, *Vogue Italia*, has a reputation for being more political than *Vogue USA*. Jones's image for the publication challenges dominant discourses.

The garment takes center stage in the image, but it conceals Jones's body, in direct contrast to the typical sexualization of Black women's bodies. Such concealment of the body is

unusual in general fashion photography and Goude's aesthetic. Not only does the black fabric drape over and veil Jones's body, but her arms also cover her breasts, a play on modesty and a norm for Italy, influenced by a strong Catholic tradition. Her crossed arms bring attention to the unusual shoulder padding of the garment, which is flesh or Earth toned. The flesh-toned shoulder pads become an extension of her body, perhaps amour, and accentuate the upper part of her torso. She appears otherworldly. Jones dons a large, curved trapezoid-shaped crown or halo, alluding to typical Divinity imagery. The image resembles those of the Black Madonna.

The Black Madonna speaks to an ancient cultural memory of the African origins of humanity, representing the original mother of Earth's children (Michello, 2020). Typically, the Black Madonna is depicted with very dark skin. This is because some of the representations are linked with pre-Christian Earth goddess traditions or early representations of the goddess Isis with her son Horus (Michello, 2020). The black skin expresses a connection with the goddess Isis and the darkness of the Earth. In Jones's image, the whole image is dark, with the only light emanating from behind her. Her body is shrouded in black fabric. An intense, Earth-blood red color accentuates the shadow. Jones covers her breasts with her arms crossed like an Egyptian mummy, but her eyes are alive, clear, and reflective. She does not smile.

A Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing reading infers a stark commentary on the Jezebel stereotype and the Black is Beautiful movement by reading resistance on Jones's body. Jones's reading as a Madonna in the image contrasts typical depictions of Black women's imagery. While the Jezebel is sexually uninhibited, seductive, and degraded, the Madonna is pure and virtuous. Her depiction plays on the Madonna-whore dichotomy and serves as a critique of the polarization and assumptions inherent in the duality. Additionally, Jones's body as the Black Madonna reimagines what Black womanhood might look like aesthetically. Jones's

Blackness is emphasized not only through color, but symbolism as well. The halo-like headpiece can double as an afro, described in Chapter Six, as a powerful political symbol reflecting Black pride and rejecting notions of assimilation and integration. It can also symbolize a crown, referencing queendom. The nod to Egyptian mummies and the goddess Isis aligns with the pan-African activism of the Black is Beautiful movement. The image is reminiscent of Black and Harlem-born Kwame Brathwaite's fashion photography of the 1950s and 1960s, which highlighted African ancestry and was a form of political commentary. Jones's depiction in the image is a testament to the resistance that a body's pose can express. By showing command of the body and thus pride, Jones projects confidence in opposition to hegemonic forces.

In contrast to her fully covered body, in the next image, Jones is almost naked and is holding a microphone in her hand (Fig 8.). The image, also by Goude, was first published in *New York Magazine* in 1978. It was so loved by Jones that she used it on her 1985 album *Island Life*

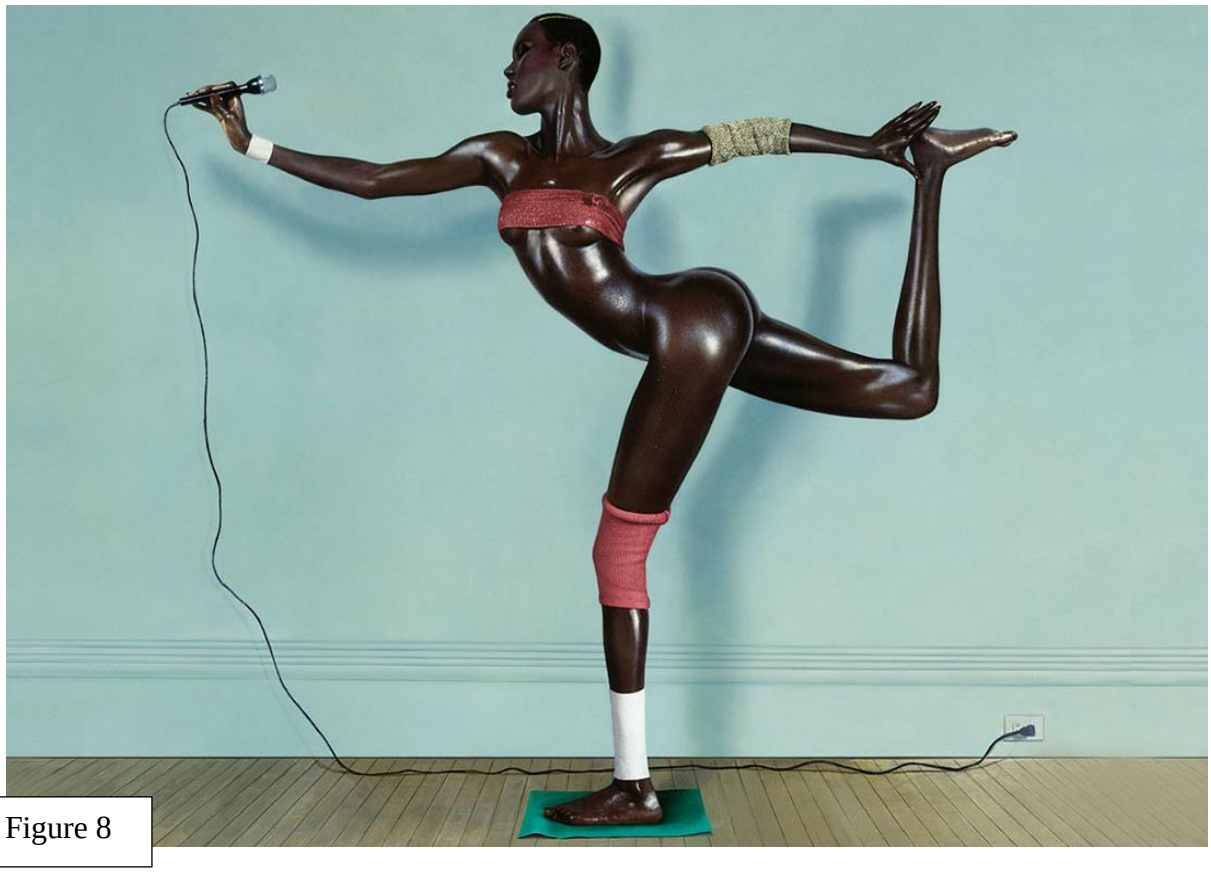

Figure 8

cover. Interestingly, the image was not a photo but a photo collage. Goude, recalling the photo, which he called "Nigger Arabesque," said: "Unless you are extraordinarily supple, you cannot do this arabesque. The main point is that Grace couldn't do it, and that's the basis of my entire work: creating a credible illusion" (Goude, n.d.). He photographed Jones in a variety of positions, using boxes to help prop up her body, and pieced these images together to create the illusion (Goude, n.d.).

This photo can be read as Goude "creating" Grace Jones and is an example of white male imagination inflicted onto the Black female body. She is pictured scantily clad, only wearing athletic tape and sweatbands and frozen in an impossible aerobic pose. Her skin has been oiled to accentuate its color and contour. Like the *Vogue Italia* image, this is an instance of a play on the assertion of a "positive" Black visual in popular culture. Goude implies that he is demonstrating that Jones can do the impossible. However, when reading the image through a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing lens, it is easy to conclude that it hinges on stereotypes of the Black female body. Black women's bodies have long been a distinct site of transgression and deference for white men and women alike. Goude reduces Jones to the mere sum of her body parts. Her breasts, torso, and buttocks are especially highlighted in the center of the frame. Her muscles bulge as she strains in the pose. She is an anomaly for even being able to assume the pose, but it is only an illusion; it is impossible to hold one's body in this position. Goude calls the image "Nigger Arabesque," a title that he surely thought was clever, but which only perpetuates disturbing colonial and racist ideology. Goude's well-received book *Jungle Fever* also reinforces his, and the fashion-industrial complex's, unsettling preoccupation with Blackness. The cover of *Jungle Fever* features Jones in a cage screaming, animalistic and untamed. In the book, he writes essays to accompany his photos of Jones, Puerto Rican communities in New York, and the gay

scene. Like the "Nigger Arabesque" image, the book is an example of fetishized colonial work, not compatible with Black women's liberatory potential. Goude, like slaveowners before him, used Jones's body to further his personal agenda and to make a profit.

Despite Goude's orchestration of "Nigger Arabesque," Jones stated that she had complete awareness of the power of the pose she struck in the image and that it helped her elucidate appreciation for her body. In her autobiography, she described how the image made her feel. "Goude's photo-elaboration of me put me inside my very own fantasy, connected to Jamaica, and New York, and Paris, and performance, and worship, and hallucination, but ultimately a world of my own" (Jones & Morley, 2015, p.54). Despite Goude putting her in this impossible pose, Jones's face is calm, serene, and almost pouted in ecstasy. Her arms extend outward, which opens her body to the viewer. Instead of covering herself as in the *Vogue Italia* image, the "Nigger Arabesque" image puts Jones's body on full display. Nicole Fleetwood (2011), in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, refers to the body on full display as excess flesh. However, excess flesh can be viewed as a form of resistance because it goes against the notions of white femininity. The bold display of excess flesh disrupts the stereotypical depictions of Black women's bodies and serves to reclaim them. Despite the orchestrated aesthetics, as Jones says in her autobiography, and through a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing lens, Jones's body in the image was crucial to her project of re-creation and the exploration of the limits of what her body is capable of.

In an unknown photo from the 1980s which I found on an online archival site called Vintage Everyday (Fig 9.), Jones is pictured in a Cadillac Seville draped in a fashion apron or smock. The garment drapes over the right side of Jones's body and ties on her left, leaving her left side bare and exposed. The garment has a black and white image of what appears to be her

face, superimposed onto the fabric. The only color on the garment is the rouge on the image's cheeks and lips, which mirrors Jones's makeup. The rest of her outfit includes silver bangles that go up to her forearm, red sunglasses, and a large wide-brimmed red hat. Her fingernails are also painted red. One hand holds on to the assist grip next to the car window while, with the other, she adjusts her sunglasses. Her legs are crossed, exposing her bare thigh. She looks cool,

Figure 9

confident, and unbothered. She is scantily dressed aside from her silver bangles and red faccessories.

Her bangles allude to *manillas*. *Manillas* were once a form of currency for West African peoples and later would become one of the main currencies during the slave trade to the Americas (Bhandare, n.d.). Women along the West African coast wore the manilla bangle to

symbolize their husband's wealth. After the slave trade, they became a symbol of wealth in the Caribbean. As a Jamaican woman, Jones likely knew of the cultural significance of the bangles.

Bright red accents in the image are noticeable in Jones's nails, lips, sunglasses, and sun hat. The color red has various meanings for women in white Western culture. One of them is its sexual connotation. Women who wear red are seen as more alluring and have sexual intent (Elliot & Niesta, 2008). In fashion, red can symbolize freedom, boldness, danger, or love (Elliot & Niesta, 2008). A woman who wears red commands attention and wants to be seen. In the African diaspora, red also symbolizes the pain and bloodshed in the struggle for liberation (Stratford, 2011). Jones's bold display of red alludes to both Western and African diasporic notions.

The car that Jones sits in, a Cadillac Seville, represents Black consumer luxury. When Cadillac sales slumped during the 1930s, the company became the first luxury automobile brand to purposefully and strategically market directly to Black consumers (Capperell, 2018). Thus, Black people have had an affinity for Cadillacs that goes deeper than just appreciating a well-engineered automobile. Cadillac exploited Black consumer desire for prestige and embraced a diverse audience when other brands did not. Cadillacs are known for the sleek, elongated lines of the automobile's body, the chrome bumpers' shine, and the immediately recognizable medallion on the hood. It is a masculine car. In a way, the Cadillac doubles for Grace Jones. She is known in the fashion-industrial complex for her statuesque body, flamboyant demeanor, and unmistakably "androgynous" style. Her specific feminine performance in a masculine car is engaging. There are three dolls with her in the vehicle. One is a porcelain clown, representing youth, girlishness, and playfulness. The second is a Jamaican clay doll which could reflect Jones's ethnic and cultural heritage. The third doll is a Victorian porcelain doll that symbolizes

femininity, a feminine ideal, and can be viewed as a status symbol. A Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing reading of Jones's bodily performance in this image critiques white Western insistence on androgyny as her most distinct characteristic.

Jones's representation often suggests reinterpreted femininity, specifically Black femininity. The industry and scholars alike have lauded Jones as an agender unicorn, neither female nor male, neither masculine nor feminine. White male imagination has always focused on her skin and muscles compared to the usual descriptors of soft white femininity. Yes, Jones subverted white Western archetypes of women and gender binaries. However, for us as Black women, who have never had the privilege of being considered "feminine," Jones's body represents Black women's bodies and the agency to choose in which ways Black femininity will be displayed. She is not a unicorn, but a Black woman, using her body to liberate herself in a white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal society.

Based on the images that I have reviewed, it is evident that Jones was aware of her role and agency commenting on Black women's visual positioning. Even though her imagery was often crafted under the direction of the white male gaze, her corporeal performance serves/ed as a subversion of that commentary. Whether fully or minimally clothed, she critiqued societal depictions of Black women and freed her body of racist notions. She used radical subjectivity as her political tool. Radical subjectivity refers to projects fundamentally challenging the dominant social formation (Blunden, 2014). As evidenced by the images, Jones centered her Blackness and used her body to challenge hegemony. Through radical subjectivity, she explicates Black body sovereignty. Body sovereignty refers to how the body is defined and how its practices are justified in finding liberation (Gillon, 2020). Jones defines her body on her own terms, which is a political intervention in the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy in which she

exists. Her imagery exudes self-confidence, joy, and pleasure and epitomizes a self-assured, strong, liberated Black femme.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

"Revolution is about *change*, and the first place the *change* begins is *in* yourself." — *Assata Shakur*

Revelations About Embodied Liberation

As Black femmes, the bodies of Black femmes, Katherine Dunham, Angela Davis, and Grace Jones are positioned against violent and colonial histories against Black people. Although the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy's racialized and gendered social constructions pervaded their lives, all three women used their bodies and practices of somatics to liberate themselves from inadequate interpretations of who they were and are. One can discern the inscribed and literal materialization of Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing ideology through their bodies by contextualizing the archival materials related to them. The use of somatics by the three women, including dress, dance, yoga, and pose, are visual forms of resistance that allow Black femmes to enact Black femininity, joy, and pleasure on their own terms. They also release them from damaging and enmeshed systems of colonial visual exposure and corporeal violence.

Liberation is fluid and exists on a spectrum. My analysis of Dunham, Davis, and Jones focuses on specific Black femmes who have always found ways to claim and express liberation through the somatics of joy and pleasure in their everyday lives. Because the locus of liberation does not fit the white mainstream's conception of liberation, it does not mean it does not have value. All three women's bodily performances serve as reminders of a particular Black femme praxis of liberation that is both personal and collective. It is personal because each woman's

experience and life are visualized through her body. It is collective because, historically, ancestral and communal resistance amongst Black women has been enacted through the body. Their bodily images convey a personal and collective reclamation of liberation. The embodied modes by which they perform Black femme praxis are catalysts that frame their liberatory control and result in sovereignty.

A Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing analysis of Dunham, Davis, and Jones's bodies in archival materials reveals much about embodied liberation. Firstly, embodied liberation is spiritual. In analyzing Dunham's body in archival imagery, for example, spiritual undertones are revealed in her dress choices or body placement. Black women have always used spiritual practices as vehicles for liberation (Musgrave et al., 2002; Marouan, 2013). The idea of spiritual freedom is ingrained in their psyches. Only when confronted with the violence, premises, laws, and imaginations of colonial forces does the sense of spiritual security become ambivalent. However, Dunham reclaimed her bodily autonomy through her somatic practices by subverting the oppressive hierarchies that sought and still seek to control Black women's bodies. By centering an African traditional spirituality, Vodou, in her bodily performances, Dunham confronted Western social norms and constructed an alternative way of being liberated, just like Black women have done before her. By reclaiming her body, a targeted site of racial and gendered oppression, as a distinctly pan-African spiritual vessel, she embodied her self-liberation.

Embodied liberation is also mental. Davis is a well-educated, middle-class Black femme intellectual who still struggles with the oppression of her race. Her mental struggles continue to drive her academic work and activism. As a professor and activist, she has fought for the abolition of prisons and spoken out against the prison-industrial complex and capitalism. She is also campaigning for racial justice through her books, speeches, and teaching. Davis consciously uses

her appearance as a symbol of societal change and demonstrates that the liberation of the mind is a pivotal revolutionary act.

Davis has used her mind and body in the fight for liberation. She has emphasized how yoga, meditating, and keeping her mind free from the discouragement of white supremacy helped her survive in prison. The sovereignty of her mind was exhibited on her body through sartorial means. The fashion and beauty industries focused solely on techniques and products that emulated white beauty standards to suppress post-slavery African-ness. Like other politically conscious Black women, Davis rejected white dominance and reclaimed African pride by wearing her hair in an afro. Additionally, the spaces in which Davis acted out her Blackness (the academy and in courtrooms, for example) say a lot about her mental strength. The analysis of her archival imagery shows that Davis has a mindful radical orientation and suggests that she has a sovereign mind.

Embodied liberation privileges the body. Jones's body appears to have been hijacked by the white and capitalist narrative of the fashion-industrial complex. However, she counteracts the politically and culturally promoted idea that her body belongs to anyone but herself. The fashion-industrial complex, and society at large, seek to have people, particularly minority women, conform to a standard. Following that standard typically has many benefits, including economic and occupational ones. It also affects land ownership, status, etc. Body sovereignty, as illustrated by Jones's bodily performance, promotes a positive relationship between the self and the body, no matter what. Despite what hegemonic forces dictate, body sovereignty supports complete body autonomy in every regard. Jones's body and image as a fashion model and singer were often controlled through a colonial and capitalistic lens. However, as evidenced by the archival material introduced in this study, she chose to feel, experience, play, refuse, take up space, be different,

make noise, and perform for no one other than herself. Her body drove her expressive work, demonstrating her power and commanding her bodily performance.

Challenging Epistemicides: A Call for a Black Feminist-Womanist and Decolonizing Analysis of Black Imagery

Opportunities for remembering and reclaiming Black liberation from histories of violence, especially at an institutional level, can reproduce forms of violence. This is especially so when the image is analyzed through the lens of the fashion-industrial complex or any other capitalist industry. Santos (2014) has termed this process "epistemicide." Epistemicide is the eugenic outcome of hegemonic epistemologies that violently impose coloniality of knowledge to foster and perpetuate social and material commitments to imperialism and white supremacy. Black Brazilian feminist Sueli Carneiro (2005) developed the concept to address the systematic destruction of Black thought and culture that accompanies genocidal practices such as slavery, police killings, and mass incarceration. Epistemicide configures a crucial dimension of whiteness over Black life. Consequently, Black women's archival imagery is too often interpreted through colonial, white, and Western knowledges.

To counter colonial thinking, a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing epistemology offers an "epistemology of the South*"* (Santos, 2014). An epistemology of the South is "a set of inquiries into the construction and validation of knowledge born in struggle, of ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy" (p. x). These epistemologies, in which I situate a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing way of analysis, include various post-abyssal knowledges, methodologies, and pedagogies that go beyond the Western understanding of the world. As Santos puts it, Western thinking and knowledge continue to operate along abyssal

lines that divide the human from the sub-human. He writes, "what most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is the impossibility of the co-presence of two sides of the line" (Santos, 2007, p. 2). On one side of the line is science, a true/false distinction. He describes a regulation/emancipation dichotomy in which abyssal thinking resides. On the other side of the line are "lay, peasant, or indigenous knowledges…intuitive or subjective understandings" (p. 4). He labels this thinking post-abyssal. Thus, a Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing framework stands to effectively counter white mainstream conceptions of Black women's imagery and liberation through post-abyssal knowledge.

In this dissertation, I aim to offer a framework to eliminate the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal residue and control permeating the analysis of Black femme bodies. It is imperative to recognize that there is more than one way in which the body can be liberated. Dunham, Davis, and Jones reveal that a Black femme praxis of the somatics of joy and pleasure *is* embodied liberation. Regarding Black womanhood and liberation, the only validation of personhood seems to come out of pain and struggle, but almost never through joy and pleasure. Black women's stories are typically told by positioning them as victims of tragic circumstances but rarely as agents of change in their lives or the world around them. A Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing framework reclaims the image of Black femmes and imbues them with complexity, imagination, personal power, joy, and pleasure.

A Reparative Aim in the Archives

The archive houses *some* Black femme stories. However, it continues to be a colonial and violent space. This study does not intend to remedy issues of empowerment and erasure embedded in the archive. Instead, it offers a framework to interpret and account for the power dynamics that the archive reproduces in the materials it houses. A Black feminist-womanist and decolonizing

archival analysis reveals some often-overlooked, culture- and gender-specific readings of Black femme archival materials. My approach to analysis poses a frame, a model, by which we might continuously and rigorously decolonize the archive.

Implications

This meditation on Black femmes and the somatics of joy and pleasure offers various additional opportunities for exploration. I know this because Black joy and pleasure are present in our culture in almost everything, including food, music, dance, art, and fashion. I believe that other Black femme scholars can employ a similar analytical frame for narrativizing other Black femme cases. Moreover, I envision research for and by Black men that centers the somatics of joy and pleasure to result in exciting and interesting findings. Further analysis of the intersections between the somatics of joy and pleasure, the erotic, the sexual, the environment, the political, and the spiritual will further the present study.

This meditation also intersects with other research areas, such as the policing of Black joy and pleasure and its criminalization. Additionally, the study adds to the transnational and diasporic conversations of Black women's embodied resistance in line with and supporting Black Brazilian women's cultural production (Carneiro, 2005; Evaristo, 2006), Afro-Puerto Rican women's cultural production (Llanos-Figueroa, 2009), Afro-German women's cultural production (Ayim et al., 1992), and African women's cultural production (Okafor, 2018), to name a few. Therefore, there are numerous ways to expand and collaborate with other Black embodiment theorists.

This study also offers an innovative and vital approach to analyzing Black women's embodied liberation, which can empower Black girls and women. Centering Black women's knowledge, joy, and bodily autonomy is an implicit desire to challenge negative and colonial perceptions of Black women's imagery and illustrate resistance and activism in their actions and

existence. There are also implications of this research in the field of visual communication, which is directly related to conversations about access and agency regarding Black femme subjects. Because the field of visual communication, such as photography and film, has primarily been a capitalistic and closed environment to those who are not white and male, Black femmes are not allowed to address and correct misrepresentations of their identities. Even in rare cases when access is granted, the spaces can be hostile. This dissertation is an initial step to examine the role of visual communication in representing marginalized communities such as Black femmes. The present study has numerous implications, and all hold liberation at the core.

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APPENDIX

Source Institution	Location	Summary of Collected Materials
New York Public Library	New York, NY	"Katherine Dunham as woman with cigar from the ballet 'Tropics- Shore Excursions'"
Library of Congress	Washington, DC	"L'Ag'Ya"
Southern Illinois University	Carbondale, IL	Katherine Dunham, *Untitled*
University of California, Los Angeles	Los Angeles, CA	"New York: Black militant Angela Davis speaks to crowd at Madison Square Garden June 29th"
Library of Congress	Washington, DC	Angela Davis, *Untitled* by Bernard Gotfryd
The New School	New York, NY	"Stanley Seligson Photograph"
Vogue Archives	Proquest Platform (online)	Grace Jones, Vogue Italia
New York Public Library	New York, NY	"Nigger Arabesque"
Everyday Vintage Archives	Online	Grace Jones, *Untitled*