

Vol. 1 No. 2 (2025)

The Spectacle of Blackness: Reconceptualizing the Black Experience in America



To be Black in America is to bear the weight of history while forging a path forward. We navigate a world that often seeks to define, confine, and undermine Black existence—through systemic racism, economic inequality, and cultural erasure. *The Spectacle of Blackness* is a narrative of Black endurance, resistance, and rebuilding in the face of perpetual adversity. This spectacle and reality is rooted in the mother working twice as hard for half the pay, the students who navigate institutions never created for them, and the activists tirelessly advocating against systems designed to silence them. We acknowledge the grief entrenched in loss, the burden of expectations, and the exhaustion of proving one's worth in spaces that undermine Black humanity. Yet, the reality of Blackness is simultaneously conceptualized in the ways we persist—through community, innovation, and unshakable credence that we deserve more than this nation has offered us.

This edition of the *Vanderbilt University African American and Diaspora Studies Undergraduate Research Journal* seeks to highlight these simultaneous truths. Our contributors examine how Black people face oppression yet rise above it. Through historical analysis, cultural critique, and personal storytelling, *The Spectacle of Blackness* tells a story of hardship but, more importantly, one of power. Use this journal to grapple with the undeniable strength of Black people; the reality of Blackness is not just about what we endure; it's about how we overcome.

Miguel Kamgiang Kamgiang, Haneneel Morinville, and Gabrielle White, Guest Editors

The African American & Diaspora Studies Undergraduate Research Journal
Guest Editors: Miguel Kamgaing Kamgaing, Hananeel Morinville, and Gabrielle White
Journal Theme: The Spectacle of Blackness

Guest Editor's Introduction

Articles

Black Bodies: Biological Racism Among Black Female Athletes 1
Miguel Kamgaing Kamgaing

The Veil We Run With: An Examination of the Veil in American Sports 6
Gabrielle White

Opinion Pieces and Short Essays

How Obama's Presidency Helped the Black Lives Matter Movement 12
Hananeel Morinville

Out of Time: Queer Temporality and the Lesbian Experience 18
Sam Mitike

Bravo's Exploitation of Black Women in Reality TV 23
Keyonte Doughty

Positionality Reflection 29
Sierra Dix

Photo-essays, Photography, and Artwork

Through the Lens of Black America: A Collection of Photos 30
Ade Forest

The Pursuit of Perfection 32
Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Poetry

Personal Liturgy #4: P-a-r-a-d-i-s-e 33
Malik Clarke

Contributor Bios 35

Black Bodies: Biological Racism Among Black Female Athletes^{1*}

Miguel B. Kamgaing Kamgaing

Black Bodies: Biological Racism Among Black Female Athletes

Historically, women have been seen as less capable than men, which has led to stereotypes that women are docile, weak, and ill-suited for leadership roles (Cahn, 2004). Such views have reinforced outdated gender norms that have permeated today's society. Cahn argues that women have also been deemed unsuitable for rigorous athletic activity. Too much and too strenuous activity, it was feared, could cause damage to their reproductive organs (St Paul, 2024). Even when women were finally allowed to engage in sports, they were challenged by limitations, such as being prohibited from running more than 200 yards. Running longer was thought to be too physically demanding for the female body. Even though women are allowed to participate in sports today, the effects of these limitations still exist.

It is imperative then to evaluate interlocking factors when considering the history of women in sports, particularly Black women (Hylton, 2008). This essay will explore the intersections of race and gender in sports. Historically, perceptions of White women in sports, as previously described, vastly differ when you add the adjective, Black. Black women were seen as brutish, lacking feminine grace, and masculine (Cahn, 2004). They were further seen as stronger and more mannish. These overarching stereotypes relate to the idea of the Black body. The impervious Black body and the inelegance of Black women have been especially harmful for the Black female athlete and the Black populace at large. Historical factors like medical racism showcase the adverse effects of such viewpoints. The United States Public Health Service Syphilis Study in Tuskegee, Alabama, which experimented on 600 Black men without

¹ Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Miguel B. Kamgaing Kamgaing, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235

informed consent, is an apt example of medical malfeasance rooted in racial science (*Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - OS*, n.d.) Black bodies have been seen as durable and therefore expendable and subject to being treated without care. We will explore how the institution of sports has exacerbated these issues, and the interconnection between Black bodies, medical racism, and women in sports.

The Impervious Black Body: An Apple a Day and Medical Racism

Racial disparities abound within the American healthcare system. Inherent bias is an especially intractable issue in medical care (*Black Americans Are Systematically Under-Treated for Pain. Why?*, n.d.). For example, Black people are systematically under-treated for pain. Research indicates that Black patients are notably less likely to be prescribed pain medication and typically receive smaller doses when they do receive it. These findings point to the misconception of the imperviousness of the Black body and its negative impacts. In a study conducted with Division 1 medical staff, they were given identical cases with one contrast concerning an athlete with an ACL tear—that contrast related to one adjective, Black. The medical staff were asked two questions: 1. “How painful was the injury, on a scale of 1-4?” and 2. “Do you agree or disagree? Interestingly, whether you agreed or disagreed with the second question, the medical staff consistently rated the Black athlete’s pain threshold as higher. In another study by Lovejoy et al., they found that whatever their class and educational backgrounds, Black women had higher mortality rates than White women with breast cancer (Lovejoy et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate the oftentimes lethal effects of the flawed idea of the impervious Black body.

Bias on the Mat: Inelegance of Black Women

Corrinne Tarver was the first Black female gymnast at the University of Georgia (UGA). At UGA she was a 9-time All-American and the first Black woman to win the NCAA

gymnastics tournament. In an interview with Dr. Gilman Whiting, Corrinne Tarver, now a gymnastics coach, tells us about her journey as a Black woman in gymnastics. Her story shines a spotlight on the troubling idea of the inelegance of Black women, as highlighted in Cahn's essay (2004). Coach Tarver talked about the scoring system's biases and subjectivity and how it led to unfair scoring. She specifically mentions the pointed toe rule and how because the underside of Black gymnasts' feet might present as starker in contrast to the top of their feet, they are more likely to be docked points for not having pointed toes than White gymnasts (Corrinne Tarver, personal communication, February 22, 2024). Her coaches also expected her to maintain a lower body fat percentage than her White teammates because Black people have higher muscle mass. Coach Tarver mentioned her time on the national team and her aspirations to join the Olympic team. She later discovered that she would never be an Olympic candidate simply because her body type was not what was deemed "elegant" or suitable for gymnasts at the time. Tarver's experiences uncover how the perceived inelegance of Black female athletes has seeped into many facets of society, disrupting Black women athletes' lives and ambitions along the way.

Analysis: Double Trouble

Thus far, this essay has discussed two key concepts that relate to Black women in sports: inelegance and biological racism. These two concepts are connected by the stereotype of the impervious female body. That Black bodies are perceived as stronger, impervious to pain, and more durable has had a disparate impact on Black athletes. Within social contexts, such stereotypes manifest in generalizations of Black people as naturally athletic, disregarding the hours of dedication that Black athletes pour into their craft for continual improvement. Black female athletes are unique in that a double jeopardy confronts them: the struggle of being Black combined with being a woman in America. Both identities are marginalized. In

Corrinne Tarver's case, she competed at a high level and dominated in her sport at the collegiate level; nonetheless, due to these biases, there was a barrier she could not surpass. Black female athletes like Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles have started breaking down these barriers due to the hard work and effort they put into the competition and the persistence of those who came before.

Throughout this essay, we have talked about women's historical experiences in sports, and the divergent experiences of Black women. Three key points are introduced: the idea of the impervious Black body, medical racism, and perceived Black female inelegance. The in-person interview between Corrinne Tarver and Dr. Gilman Whiting illuminated how these factors impact women's sports and their particular effects on Black female athletes. A brief analysis of how these factors converge to perpetuate inequality within society and sports for Black women.

Bibliography

Black Americans are Systematically Under-Treated for Pain. Why? (n.d.). Frank Batten

School of Leadership and Public Policy | University of Virginia.

<https://batten.virginia.edu/about/news/black-americans-are-systematically-under-treated-pain-why>.

Cahn, S. (2004). Cinderellas of Sport. *Sport and the color line: Black athletes and race relations in twentieth-century America* (P. Miller & D. Wiggins, Eds.). Routledge.

Hylton, K. (2008). 'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory (1st ed.).

Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203893678>

Liberti, R. (2004). We were ladies, we just played like the Boys. *Sport and the color line: Black athletes and race relations in twentieth-century America* (P. Miller & D. Wiggins, Eds.). Routledge.

Lovejoy, L. A., Shriver, C. D., Haricharan, S., & Ellsworth, R. E. (2023). Survival Disparities in US Black Compared to White Women with Hormone Receptor Positive-HER2 Negative Breast Cancer. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20(4), 2903. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20042903>.

Miller, P.B., & Wiggins, D.K. (Eds.). (2003). Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth Century America (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203497456>

St Paul, C. (2024, January 19). *A brief history of women in sports*. Concordia St. Paul. <https://kinesiology.csp.edu/sports-coaches-and-trainers/a-brief-history-of-women-in-sports/>.

Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - OS. (n.d.). [https:// www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm).

The Veil We Run With: An Examination of the Veil in American Sports^{2*}

Gabrielle White

An Examination of the Veil in American Sports and Culture

When W.E.B. Du Bois asserted that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line,” he created an ideological phenomenon that would characterize American racial consciousness (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3; Hylton, 2008, p. 2). Although a presentist lens of Du Bois’s philosophies exposes its elitist overtones, his conception of the color line as a social barrier that perpetuates racial animus by dividing Americans remains an unmovable barrier more than a century later. On one side of this color line, Black Americans reside behind a veil: a metaphorical object that shrouds White Americans’ perceptions of their experiences, identities, and humanities. Throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois utilizes these racial barriers as foundations to navigate the racial dilemmas of the twentieth century. And, this work analyzes a significant–yet often overlooked–manifestation of the veil in America: sports.

Sports are an indispensable facet of American culture; from Little League soccer games to the annual March Madness, most Americans have a personal experience with sports—whether as spectators or athletes. However, there remains a false assumption that sports are wholly separate from the social context in which they occur, effectively erasing the interconnectedness of racism and American athletics. Black American sports began as an involuntary plantation pastime that created a spectacle of enslaved Black Americans (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). As American racial dynamics continuously shifted, these dynamics in sports followed suit.

Although there is a growing body of literature dedicated to the intersections of race, sports, and

² Dr. Gilman W. Whiting, the current Associate Chair of African American & Diaspora Studies, provided preliminary research resources. None of these findings have been published, and there are no current conflicts of interest to disclose. Communication regarding this work should be addressed to Gabrielle White, an undergraduate student at Vanderbilt University, majoring in African American & Diaspora Studies and Culture, Advocacy, and Leadership. Email: gabrielle.e.white@vanderbilt.edu

American culture, few directly analyze the twice-told narrative of Black American athletes and sports through the differing accounts of White and Black Americans and the racial frameworks of the color line and veil, an inadequacy this essay seeks to remedy.

Sights from Outside the Veil

One must first conceptualize the view outside to sympathize with the contents inside the veil, effectively the lived experiences of Black American athletes. Scientific racism, or the practice of discrimination based on contrived biological differences between races, arose from European justifications for slavery and racial hierarchies (Miller, 2015, p. 330). Generally, these pseudo-scientific findings justified White Americans' predated engagement of "othering" and the intentional dehumanization of Black Americans to assert their inherent inferiority and justify the inhumanities perpetrated against them (Hylton, 2008, p. 5). However, scientific racism was also a necessary act of self-preservation for White Americans; if African Americans were intellectually inferior, then White superiority—amid ever-growing Black athletic dominance and accomplishments—could be preserved. In *The Anatomy of Scientific Racism*, Patrick Miller grappled with the pervasive nature of scientific racism within American sports through Carlton S. Coon. Despite his accolades as a Harvard anthropologist, Coon insisted on the biological differences between the "fast-twitch muscles" in Black versus White individuals (Miller, 2015, pp. 333-336). Although these pseudo-scientific findings, and scientific racism ideologies more broadly, were eventually disproved, the underlying misconceptions of Black athletes remained.

Instead of overt assertions of Black athletes' biological differences, terms like primitivity became a dog-whistle allusion to their intellectual and emotional inferiority, thus subtly replacing its precursor. Although the conception of Black primitivity stemmed from master narratives of slavery, the term gained momentum as a placeholder for scientific racism because it effectively evaded previous criticisms. Although this language shift is largely undocumented,

William C. Rhoden (2006) noted that by the twenty-first century, popular media already depicted Black athletes as “selfish individual players with an incessant ‘one-on-one’ mentality.” These depictions of “one-on-one” and “selfish” behaviors directly reference Black athletic primitivity as they associate Black athletes with survival instincts. When White Americans regard Black athletes like NFL player Marvin Upshaw as “*animals* [able to] get down and beat on each other like that,” they replace the language of scientific racism with that of primitivity, giving the illusion of progress while reinforcing racist practices (Messner, 2007, p. 95).

Outside the veil, Black athletic achievements were and continue to be accredited to Black Americans’ “natural” abilities and tendencies toward primitivity (Miller, 2015, pp. 327-341). As such, the veil in American sports became two-sided: White Americans failed to recognize the humanity of Black athletes and their anti-black racist practices as acts of self-preservation. By diminishing the ever-growing accomplishments of Black athletes to their biology, White Americans could maintain their sense of racial superiority. However, the simultaneous disproving of scientific racism and Black athletic dominance threatened to dismantle this social order. Therefore, Black athletes became an enduring and “uneasy symbol of African Americans’ deeply rooted presence in America” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 84). As this symbol of unwavering endurance prevailed, White Americans tightened their grasp on the sports veil—hoping to shield themselves from the undeniable success of Black American athletes.

In the Depths of the Veil

Within the recesses of the sports veil, one will witness Black American athletes’ humanity and resistance (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). Black athleticism began on plantations to pacify potential resistance efforts. However, sports quickly became a tangible way for Black Americans to gain upward economic mobility, rally around Black success publicly, and navigate racially oppressive conditions. William C. Rhoden (2006) contended that “physical competition [within

sports] became another means of salvaging a portion of lost self-esteem.” Moreover, sports became a potential means for Black Americans to regain social power by leveraging their platforms as successful athletes. Although Black intellectuals like Frederick Douglass acknowledged the dangerously repressive nature of sports—in terms of Black resistance efforts—he also recognized their potential as a tool for mobility and racial progress (Rhoden, 2006, pp. 48-49). One of the most prominent Black jockeys in American history, Isaac Murphy, exemplified the social and economic mobility afforded by sports. At the peak of his career in the late nineteenth century, Murphy earned between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per year—equating to about \$500,00 per year today—distinguishing himself as one of the highest-paid athletes of his time (Rhoden, 2006, pp. 64-65). Even after the infamous Jockey Syndrome, racially discriminatory sports practices where Black athletes are incrementally excluded from participation, his athletic success attested to American sports as a potential vehicle of unparalleled progress.

For Black athletes, existence has always been resistance: resistance to scientific racism, American racial discrimination, and White Americans’ view from outside the veil. As Hylton (2008) illustrated, race is a “self-reinforcing process” that pervades American culture and sports; however, Black athletes have always sought to disprove racialized notions of sports. When Jesse Owens amassed numerous gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games, many Americans falsely attributed his success to the biological differences of Black Americans (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). In response, W. Montague Cobb, a Black Howard University professor, conducted muscular biopsies on Owens. Unfortunately, for the aforementioned Carlton S. Coon and other proponents of race biology, Cobb concluded that “determination and proper training” determined athletic success, not race biology (Miller, 2015, p. 336). Even when the notion of primitivity as a continuation of scientific racism dominated American depictions of Black sports culture, athletes

like boxer Joe Louis took ample precautions to dispel the stereotype of Black athletes as barbaric, flamboyant, and selfish (Rhoden & Farrell, 1996). Prominent Black athletes used their positionality to reject racially obtuse views of Black Americans publicly, thus attempting to lift the sports veil for White Americans. Whether it is the quintessential images of Black athletic resistance, such as the 1968 Olympic protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos or the distorted images of Black athletes that exist outside the veil, Black athletes' mere existence is resistance to this veil and a testament to Black American humanity.

“The Veil is a Distance Run?”

The journey of Black American athletes is a distance run with a veil. As Black athletes run toward what they perceive as racial progress, they carry the actual inhibition—the sports veil—with them. Although this essay seeks to lift the veil of American sports and allow White Americans to conceptualize its deeper recesses, this exercise may prove negligible (Du Bois, 1903). As Americans, we consume sports media that perpetuates a veiled representation of Black American athletes, one that continues to harm us all; to diminish the influence of this veil, we must analyze, critique, and question how dog-whistle terms like ‘aggressive,’ ‘selfish,’ or ‘flamboyant’ further reinforce the American sports veil. Unfortunately, deliberate actions may prove futile in the face of the immovable forces of institutionalized racism, the necessity for racism to maintain capitalism, and purposeful inaction. As Black activist Audre Lorde (1984) beautifully contended, “A master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.” As such, only an incredibly radical force will lift the American sports veil *and* implement lasting change for Black American athletes. And only then will Black athletes be able to relinquish the veil with which they currently run.

Bibliography

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Farrell, L. D. & Rhoden, W. C. (1996). *The Journey of the African-American Athlete*.

HBO Sports.

Hylton, K. (2008). *'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory*. Routledge.

Messner, M.A. (2007). *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport*.

State University of New York Press.

Miller, P. B. & Wiggins, D. K. (2004). *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth Century America*. Routledge.

Rhoden, W. A. (2006). *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*. Tantor and Blackstone Publishing.

Whiting, G. W. (2015, February 15). *Only the puck was black: the story of race and the NHL*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/only-the-puck-was-black-a-story-of-race-and-the-nhl-37450>.

How Obama's Presidency Helped the Black Lives Matter Movement

Hananeel Morinville

In 2013, three organizers came together with a simple message: “Black Lives Matter.” Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created a Black-centered political will and movement that called attention to Black humanity in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. In 2012, Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law protected Zimmerman as he claimed self-defense and was acquitted by a six-woman jury (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). The eruption of emotions and widespread media coverage of police brutality in 2013 angered many, especially since there was—for the first time in America’s history—a Black man as president. As President and Black-American man, many contended that Barack Obama understood what it meant to be Black in America, and still, he fell short in protecting Black lives. This piece seeks to correct that misguided narrative and highlight his impact on the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Black Americans losing their lives at the hands of police is not a new phenomenon. Instead, it started as early as the nineteenth century with slave patrols that were created to monitor Black people in America—both free and enslaved (NAACP). These slave patrols laid the groundwork for modern policing that continues to affect Black Americans disproportionately. For decades, Black Americans have rallied and resisted a status quo that denies their humanity and continues to relegate them to a second-class citizenship status. In the 1960s and ‘70s, it was evident that America had a police brutality issue, given the constant rallies and riots that occurred. However, in 1991, Americans could no longer ignore this issue (NPR, 2017). In an unprecedented manner, all Americans could watch the footage of a violent encounter between a Black man, Rodney King, and the Los Angeles Police Department. Four police officers savagely

beat Rodney King, leaving him with a fractured facial bone, broken right ankle and teeth, and permanent neurological damage.

Barack Obama was no stranger to these issues. He worked as an organizer in Chicago, a city known for its disproportionate police presence in Black communities. And, in the 2008 presidential race, he campaigned on disparities between crack and powder cocaine punishments, an issue that primarily impacted communities of color. When the Black Lives Matter movement began, there was insurmountable pressure on the White House. Obama was America's first Black president, and Black Americans had high expectations for him regarding racial justice. With this presidential win, many White conservative Americans refused to recognize race, now believing America was post-racial. Despite this dichotomy of White conservative color-blindness and Black expectations, Obama used his administration to help the Black Lives Matter movement and its organizers to the best of his ability.

In 2013, George Zimmerman's acquittal caused nationwide protests. Americans, regardless of color, were furious (Reed, 2013). Zimmerman had not acted out of self-defense; instead, he initiated the conflict that resulted in the murder of an innocent Black teenager. In Los Angeles, demonstrators threw rocks and batteries at police officers. In New York, hundreds marched around Time Square carrying signs and chanting "Justice for Trayvon Martin." In Nashville, Beyoncé called for a moment of silence during her concert. Americans demanded change, and all eyes turned to the White House to see what the president would say about this issue. Initially, Obama called for calm and peace. Then, he gave an emotional, 20-minute speech about his own experiences with racism in America. He stated, "There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me." He also articulated that "Trayvon could have

been my son.” Obama was emotional but, more importantly, genuine in his message, resonating with Black and White Americans.

During Obama’s second term, the Black Lives Matter movement took off, and his administration significantly shaped this movement. Firstly, President Obama acknowledged racism and—cautiously—approved the Black Lives Matter Movement by speaking with activists and organizers. He understood the need for this movement, which would ultimately prove crucial to the movement’s success. Secondly, Black Lives Matter protestors did not have to fear opposition from the White House or federal agencies like the FBI. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black leaders were heavily surveilled by the FBI; there were also numerous efforts made to delegitimize and suppress many of these organizations (Hoban, 2021).

Obama was always cautious when speaking about race. As the first Black president of the United States, there was a different and unwritten set of rules and expectations for him. For instance, when Obama wore a tan suit to a press conference in 2014, it became a major news headline because the color was deemed “unpresidential.” Yet, in his second term, the names of victims of police brutality flooded the media: Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Michael Brown. Like Trayvon Martin’s death, Michael Brown’s death left a lasting impact on the Black Lives Matter Movement and America. When he was shot and killed in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, protests began *immediately* as Black Americans cried out in anger, sadness, and disappointment. The police in Ferguson responded with overwhelming force, creating a conversation in America around police militarization. *Is it too much?*, Americans asked themselves.

Obama sharply criticized the Ferguson police department for violations of the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments, even though the shooting was ruled justified. Activists

pushed for systemic solutions, and Obama pushed for the same. In 2014, he established the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which aimed to address police brutality by increasing body camera usage, establishing civilian review boards, providing additional training to police officers, and encouraging community policing. Additionally, in 2015, he issued an executive order to limit transfers and establish protocols for oversight and training. Activists' demands were not ignored; Obama's administration listened to them and changed the protocols. Before the Black Lives Matter movement, Obama's administration highlighted the importance of dialogue and community engagement. With the activist demands, his administration understood that structural and legal work had to be done.

With the creation and mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement, there was nationwide attention on the issue of police brutality. Two central factors contributed to the success of this movement. First, the simple fact that Obama acknowledged the movement's legitimacy. The Black Lives Matter movement began with Black America. Obama did not 'stand in the way' of activists and organizers. Instead, he worked alongside them and attempted to realize their goals. His cooperation was vital to the movement's success, and the president remained on their side. Second, the media played a significant role in displaying police brutality as a continuous threat to Black Lives. The media has always been a powerful tool, but regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, Americans perpetually witnessed these tragedies on their Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook feeds. These events were shown on the news and discussed on the radio; this issue could not and would not be ignored. As Americans now saw and heard about the problem, many were galvanized to act and create change.

The claim that Barack Obama failed the Black Lives Matter movement overlooks the more profound ways in which his presidency laid the groundwork for its growth and impact. His

presence in the White House—as an unapologetically Black president navigating the highest office in a nation built on anti-Blackness—helped expose the limits of representation alone and fueled a new wave of activism. His administration’s Department of Justice investigations, the creation of the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, and his rhetoric on systemic racism gave legitimacy to issues that previous presidents ignored. More importantly, his presidency catalyzed a generation of Black activists to push beyond traditional politics and demand structural change. Far from stifling the movement, Obama’s tenure helped shape the conditions that made the Black Lives Matter movement an unstoppable force for justice.

Bibliography

Alvarez, Lizette, and Cara Buckley. "Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, July 14, 2013.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>.

"Discredit, Disrupt, and Destroy': FBI Records Acquired by the Library Reveal Violent Surveillance of Black Leaders, Civil Rights Organizations." UC Berkeley Library. Accessed March 9, 2023. <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/about/news/fbi>.

Farzan, Antonia Noori. "Five Years Ago, Obama Was Blasted for Wearing a Tan Suit. Now, It's Used to Contrast Him with Trump." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, August 28, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/08/28/tan-suit-scandal-obama-trump/>.

"George Zimmerman Acquittal Leads to Protests across US Cities." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, July 15, 2013.

[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/15/trayvon martin-protests-streets-acquittal](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/15/trayvon-martin-protests-streets-acquittal).

Krbechek, A. S., & Bates, K. G. (2017a). When La erupted in anger: A look back at the Rodney King Riots. Retrieved from

[https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots](https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots)

The origins of modern day policing. (2021). Retrieved from

<https://naacp.org/findresources/history-explained/origins-modern-day-policing>.

Out of Time: Queer Temporality and the Black Lesbian Experience

Sam Mitike

Introduction

At nineteen, I finally saw myself for who I truly was, feeling as if I'd arrived late to my own life. This sense of being "out of time" perpetually appears in queer narratives, especially those of Black lesbians. The concept of queer temporality offers a framework to grapple with these nonlinear—and often disrupted—conceptions of time, which ultimately challenge the heteronormative life trajectory that society expects us to follow. In this piece, I contend with queer temporality in lesbian narratives as a reflection of the complex, non-linear experiences of Black queer women. As I describe, these women are forced to navigate homophobic backgrounds, delayed self-expression, and the search for authenticity—just as I have. Through an analysis of Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House*, the 'Black Mirror' episode "San Junipero," Dee Rees' film, *Pariah*, and my personal reflections, we will explore how these diverse contemporary narratives capture the unique temporal experiences of Black lesbian lives.

Theoretical Framework of Queer Temporality

Queer temporality, popularized by Jack Halberstam, suggests that queer subjectivity engenders new ways of understanding time, space, and maturity. For Black lesbian experiences, this concept has additional significance due to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Black queer women often find themselves 'out of sync' with the heteronormative expectations and cultural timelines of their communities. Ultimately, the relevance of queer temporality to Black lesbian experiences lies in its ability to validate the fragmented, circular, or suspended nature of our journeys. It allows us to conceptualize our lives not as "delayed" nor "off-track" but as following a different yet equally valid temporal logic.

The Portrayal of Trauma *In the DreamHouse*

Carmen Machado's memoir offers a poignant exploration of queer temporality through its innovative structure and content matter. The memoir's non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of trauma, particularly the experiences in abusive queer relationships. Throughout, Machado's utilization of vignettes creates a kaleidoscopic view of her experiences, further challenging traditional notions of time in storytelling. This structure reflects how trauma disrupts our perception of temporal continuity—specifically, how the past intrudes on the present, and the future becomes a space of fear and possibility. The book's format also illustrates the cyclical nature of abuse and healing. Machado revisits experiences and themes throughout, which mirrors how humans process and reprocess traumatic experiences over time. While my personal experiences differ from Machado's, I empathize with the book's portrayal of time as fluid and subjective. Like Machado, I have revisited my past traumas, understanding them differently each time.

“San Junipero” and the Constraint-Free Timeline

In the highly successful Netflix series, 'Black Mirror,' the episode “San Junipero” explores queer temporality through science fiction. The episode occurs in a virtual afterlife where people can select their age and time, allowing for an exploration of queer love across eras. The ability to choose one's age and time-period serves as an incredibly moving metaphor for queer self-discovery and expression. This allows characters, particularly Kelly and Yorkie, to grapple with their identities without the constraints of their original timelines. This portrayal of temporality resonates deeply with the experiences of many queer individuals who feel they must 'go back in time' to rediscover and express the suppressed facets of their identities. The

episode's portrayal of love across history illustrates the temporal transcendency of queer love, challenging the notion that there is a "right time" for love and self-discovery; this message is particularly moving for queer individuals who came out later in life. My own experiences with delayed self-expression mirror those of Yorkie's journey. Like her, I felt like I was experiencing a youth and freedom in my early twenties that I should have had years before.

***Pariah* and the Chosen Family**

Dee Rees' film *Pariah* explores queer temporality from a young Black lesbian's perspective. The film follows Alike, a 17-year-old African-American girl from Brooklyn who embraces her identity as a lesbian. *Pariah* is particularly relevant to my experiences as a young Black queer woman, especially its navigation of family expectations, cultural pressures, and desires. Through this film, Rees captures the sense of being out of sync with one's surroundings, a key facet of queer temporality. While more linear-structured than *In the DreamHouse*, the film still subtly experiments with time. Alike's growth does not follow a straight path; instead, she moves forward and backward, 'trying on' different versions of herself. This experimentation reflects the cyclical nature of queer self-discovery, particularly for those who grew up in homophobic environments. *Pariah* also explores the concept of a 'chosen family' and its relation to queer temporality. Alike's relationship with her biological family is strained, yet she finds support in her queer community. This creation of alternative kinship is a common theme in queer narratives and often involves reimagining life's timeline.

To be Young, Queer, and Black: My Personal Reflection

Reflecting on these narratives, I find connections and divergences with my own experiences. Like Machado, I have grappled with the nonlinear nature of processing trauma. I understand the cyclical revisiting of past events, each time with a new understanding, as it has

been crucial to my journey. The concept of “queer time” has been particularly relevant in my coming out process and family dynamics. Growing up in a homophobic African household created a temporal dissonance, I perpetually felt like I was living in a different time than my peers, unable to explore my identity freely. This delay in self-expression meant that when I did start to come out at nineteen, I felt behind and ahead of my time.

I’ve realized that the impact of cultural and familial homophobia on my perception of time and self has been profound. It created a sense of suspended animation, where part of me remained ‘frozen in time’ while the world continued. The process of thawing—of allowing myself to grow and change—has been both liberating yet disorienting. My sibling’s experience of being disowned after coming out as transgenders creates another layer to this temporal complexity. Their journey has run parallel to mine, yet on a different time, illustrating how even within the same family, queer experiences of time vary dramatically.

Conclusion

Queer temporality in lesbian narratives, as explored through works like *In the DreamHouse*, “San Junipero,” and *Pariah* reflects the complex realities of Black lesbian experiences. These stories capture our journeys' nonlinear, often disrupted nature, validating experiences that cannot neatly conform to heteronormative timelines. These narratives provide mirrors for those navigating similar journeys and windows for others to understand our experiences. By challenging traditional notions of time and progress, these narratives create space for a multiplicity of queer experiences. As we continue to write our stories, we redefine not just what it means to be queer, but what it means to exist in time. Our narratives, with all their complexities and nonlinearities, are not just valid—they are vital because they offer new ways of conceptualizing love, identity, and the human experience.

Bibliography

Brooker, Charlie, creator. "San Junipero." *Black Mirror*, season 3, episode 4, Netflix, 21 Oct.

2016.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York

University Press, 2005.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the DreamHouse: A Memoir*. Graywolf Press, 2019.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York

University Press, 2009.

Rees, Dee, director. *Pariah*. Focus Features, 2011.

Bravo's Exploitation of Black Women in Reality TV

Keyonte Doughty

Reality television thrives on spectacle, and no franchise embodies this more than *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA). As Bravo's first all-Black Housewives series, RHOA has been one of the network's most successful franchises, praised for bringing Black women's stories to mainstream reality TV. However, this visibility comes at a cost: Bravo deliberately manufactures and capitalizes on conflict among its Black cast members, profiting from the very behavior it later condemns. Each season culminates in a highly orchestrated reunion episode, where cast members reconvene to reflect on the most dramatic events of the season. These reunions are not organic conversations but are deliberately structured by producers to maximize conflict and ensure high engagement. Production can last up to twelve hours (or as many as sixteen when including hair, makeup, and preparation), spanning multiple episodes. In an interview with *The Breakfast Club*, Nene Leakes, widely regarded as the driving force behind RHOA's success, likened the reunion to a "lion's den." She explained, "All the producers and executives are there, and so the girls are trying to prove themselves, you know, trying to step up. 'I want my peach next year,' trying to make sure they have a position."¹

This pressure to entertain creates a high-stakes environment where conflict is expected and often encouraged by production. One of the clearest examples of Bravo's exploitative tactics occurred during the RHOA Season 6 reunion. Kenya Moore and Porsha Williams were placed in a situation where escalating tensions led to a physical altercation. Rather than intervening, Bravo producers allowed, and arguably encouraged, the conflict, knowing it would generate higher ratings. This paper argues that Bravo's reality TV model thrives on spectacle, intentionally fostering and amplifying conflict among Black women to boost viewership, while simultaneously portraying them as aggressive for entertainment value. By analyzing Bravo's

production strategies and the network's broader history of leveraging conflict for profit, this paper will examine how Bravo constructs these narratives, strategically manipulates tension, and benefits from the commodification of Black women's pain.

Bravo's Audience and the Rise of RHOA

Bravo is an American television network and a subsidiary of NBCUniversal, reaching over 94 million subscribers in the United States alone.² The *Real Housewives* franchise is the network's highest-rated series, offering a dramatized portrayal of affluent women's personal and professional lives, often showcasing their marriages, families, and friendships through a heightened lens of conflict and extravagance. Mark Orbe, a professor of media and communications at Ohio University, highlights that commercial media success is not solely dependent on audience size but also on the demographic composition of that audience.³ For years, Bravo's primary viewership consisted of affluent White women. However, the introduction of RHOA in 2008 dramatically expanded the network's reach, drawing in a new demographic (Black female viewers) whom former NBCUniversal executive vice president Lauren Zalaznick acknowledged were "completely underserved at the time."⁴ As Bravo's audience expanded, so did its programming strategy. Instead of embracing more nuanced storytelling, the network leaned into spectacle, particularly among Black women, to sustain engagement. This shift reveals Bravo's reliance on conflict as a tool for profitability.

Conflict as a Ratings Strategy

Calvin Monroe, a graduate student at Georgia State University, examines this dynamic in his master's thesis, arguing that "the more successful and profitable the RTV [reality TV] show, the more derogatory and controversial its representations of women are."⁵ One of the most infamous examples of Bravo's conflict-driven production strategy occurred during the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* Season 6 reunion. A heated verbal exchange between Porsha Williams and Kenya Moore escalated into a physical confrontation. Kenya, wielding a scepter and waving

it in Porsha's face, deliberately provoked her, while producers reportedly found the spectacle amusing and continued to fuel the conflict.

The first clear indication that the situation was escalating came when Porsha snatched the scepter from Kenya's hand. Despite this visible sign of distress, production did not intervene, allowing the tension to build further. Later in the episode, Kenya escalated matters by using a megaphone to insult Porsha, calling her "a dumb hoe."⁶ This final provocation led Porsha to stand up and physically drag Kenya by her hair. Carlos King, a key producer, later admitted that he recognized the imminent escalation but deliberately chose not to intervene.⁷ His inaction underscores Bravo's prioritization of spectacle over ethical responsibility; rather than de-escalating the conflict, production allowed it to unfold, fully aware of the ratings boost such moments generate. The altercation between Porsha Williams and Kenya Moore exemplifies this claim, drawing in 3.1 million viewers.⁸ Despite publicly condemning their behavior, Bravo still chose to air the footage. The network had the editorial power to omit or edit the material. Instead, it deliberately broadcasted it, fully aware of the engagement and profit it would generate. This contradiction (condemning while capitalizing) is central to Bravo's exploitative approach.

Bravo's strategy of leveraging conflict for viewership was apparent from the very first RHOA reunion. During Season 1, a heated verbal exchange erupted between Nene Leakes and the only White cast member, Kim Zolciak-Biermann. As tensions escalated, Leakes moved closer to Zolciak-Biermann, appearing as if she might physically confront her. Andy Cohen, seated between them, later remarked, "Nene low-key was starting to lunge at Kim," while fellow housewife Deshawn Snow noted that Lisa Wu was practically restraining Leakes to prevent an altercation.⁹ Once again, Bravo allowed the situation to unfold and actively captured it on camera, prioritizing spectacle over de-escalation. Their leadership's response reinforced the network's willingness to amplify such conflicts. Following the reunion's high viewership,

then-CEO of NBCUniversal Jeff Zucker personally emailed Cohen, stating, “Wow, nice numbers. Congratulations.”¹⁰ Encouraged by the success, Cohen recalled, “That’s when I started pushing for multipart reunions because it seemed ridiculous to not air more of this great material we were getting.”¹¹ His characterization of near-physical altercations as “great material” underscores Bravo’s commercial strategy—one that thrives on the commodification of Black women’s conflicts while simultaneously claiming to denounce such behavior.

Conclusion

Black women’s bodies, and by extension, their narratives, remain at the mercy of Bravo. The transactional relationship between Bravo and its Black cast members is inherently exploitative, with the network reaping far more financial and cultural benefits than it provides in return. These women deserve not only greater agency over their portrayals but also the freedom to exist beyond the restrictive framework Bravo has constructed for them. Bravo’s exploitation of Black women’s conflicts reflects a larger media trend—one that profits from negative stereotypes while outwardly claiming to denounce them. The network frames physical altercations as scandalous yet depends on them to sustain engagement. By refusing to intervene and even fueling these conflicts, Bravo demonstrates a clear double standard—capitalizing on the very behavior it later condemns.

Without a fundamental restructuring of who holds decision-making power, Bravo’s portrayal of Black women will continue to be dictated by profit rather than authenticity. Michelle Rice, president of TV One, highlights the importance of diversity behind the scenes, stating,

“It’s about having Black people in production and programming roles that have true green-light power to make sure that we’re putting things on the air that are true, authentic, and quality representations of all people of color.”¹²

The issue is not merely on-screen representation but the lack of Black decision-makers behind the camera. Producers hold the ultimate power in reality television, shaping narratives that prioritize profit over authenticity. A more diverse production team could challenge Bravo's formula, where negative depictions of Black women drive higher ratings. They could push for more authentic and empowering representations by actively resisting these exploitative strategies. Until the balance of power shifts, reality television will continue to exploit Black women for entertainment. The industry must move beyond spectacle and invest in narratives that respect the full humanity of its subjects.

Notes

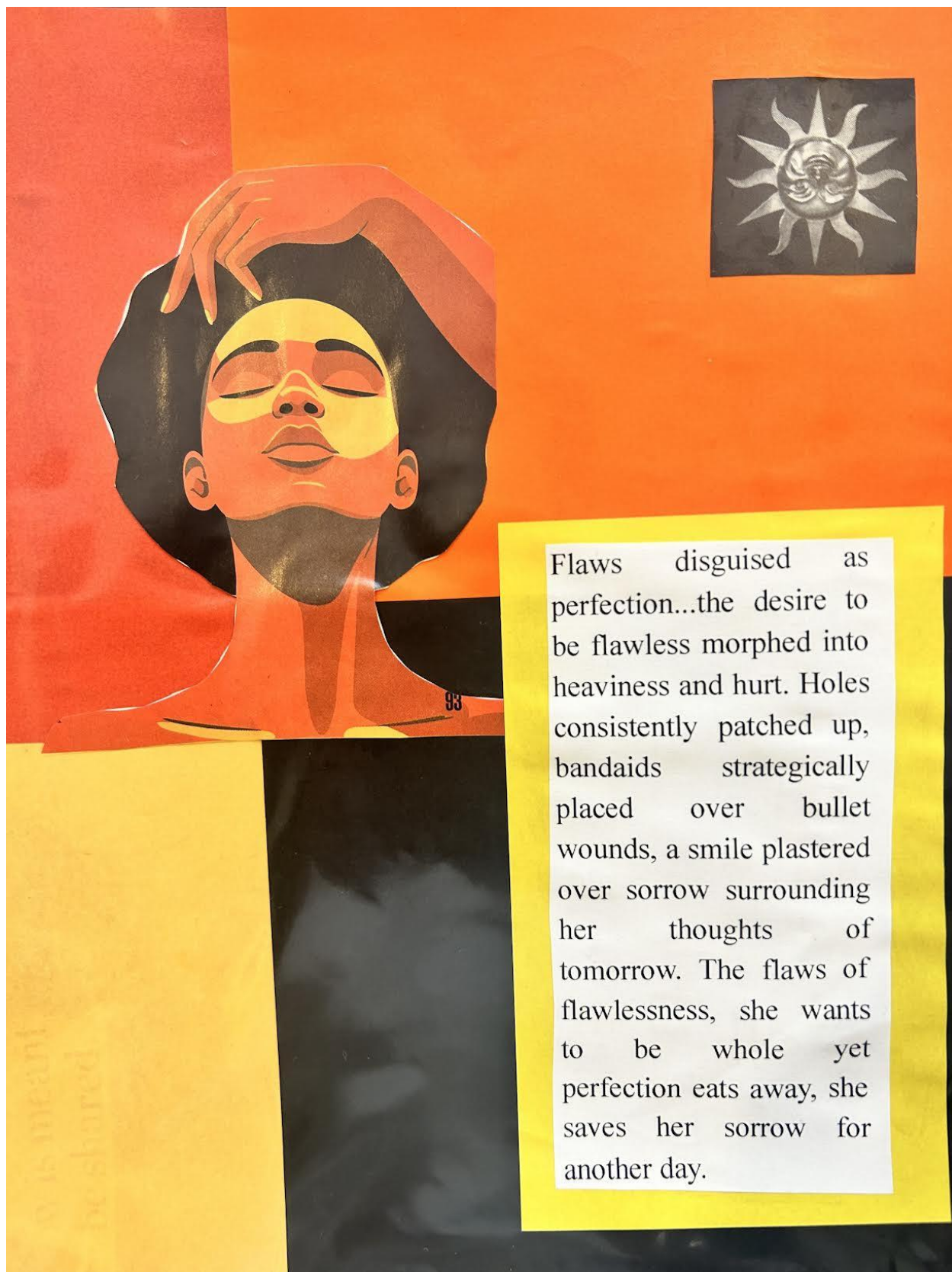
1. Envy, D. J., Yee, A., and Charlamagne Tha God. (4 March 2020). Nene Leakes dishes on RHOA cast members, false narratives, marriage + more.” YouTube, uploaded by Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZd3HcEbVFI&feature=youtu.be.
2. Cox, Nicole. (June 2012). The housewives' guide to better living: promoting consumption on bravo's the real housewives. *Communication, Culture, and Critique*, Volume 5, Issue 2, Pages 295–312, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2012.01126>.
3. Orbe, M. (5 September 2008). Representations of race in reality tv: watch and discuss. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25:4, 345-352, DOI: 10.1080/15295030802327790.
4. Quinn, Dave. (2021). Not all diamonds and ros  : the inside story of the real housewives from the people who lived it. Andy Cohen Books. (PAGE 7; Lauren quote)
5. Monroe, C. (2015). “Black themed reality television & racial identity: gendered perceptions from black college students.” Thesis, Georgia State University, https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/aas_theses/28.
6. “Reunion: Part 1” Real Housewives of Atlanta, created by Scott Dunlop, season 6, episode 23, Truly Original, 2014.
7. Quinn, Not all diamonds and ros  , pg. 7
8. “Reunion: Part 3” Real Housewives of Atlanta, created by Scott Dunlop, season 6, episode 25, Truly Original, 2014.
9. Quinn, Not all diamonds and ros  , pg. 5
10. Ibid, pg. 5
11. Ibid, pg. 5
12. Shorter, S. (2016). Real housewives or real lies? new constructions of ‘housewives’ on the real housewives of Atlanta.” *Black Women’s Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, edited by Allison Donnetrice et al., Lanham, Lexington Books, pp. 213–32.

Positionality Reflection

It was my high school senior year, and I had an away game in Cheatham County. It's a fairly rural area and is over 90% white. I have played this team many times; my fellow Black teammates and I have had trouble with them before. Years prior, an African girl on the team was flagged several times for being "overly aggressive" and "endangering" other players. So, my coaches have prepared us for areas with high tension for a team compromised from a primarily Black school. But this time, I was unprepared for what would come out of this parent's mouth. We were playing a regular game in the middle of the season, so the weather had changed slightly. Parents and friends lined the sides of the field with blankets and cozy gear. It was before the half-time was called, and we were up a few points. The other team had taken control of the ball and was heading downfield toward the defensive line. As the opposing team's forward tried to head for a goal, I, a wing defender, met her before she got close, took possession of the ball, and sent it back up the field. This slowed the play on our head of the field, and before the play began to pick back up, a white woman from the sidelines cupped her hands and shouted, "*****, you're gonna let that gorilla take the ball from you?". My teammates within earshot immediately started yelling at her, and other parents began reprimanding her. This was the back left corner of the field, so there was no referee and only a few players. My eyes began to swell with tears, and when we were called for half-time, the defensive line and goalie informed my coach. The parent was collected and kicked out, and the referee and other coach apologized profusely. At the end of the game, which we lost, the other team and passing parents apologized. The ride home on the bus was silent, and the next day at practice, my coach pulled me aside and she gave me a letter from the school on behalf of the woman. She also informed me that other people in the community had caught wind of this and were advocating on my behalf for the woman to be permanently removed from games and to write her apology to me. With no one of my own at an away game, I stood there and was criticized by an adult woman for a soccer play. At that moment, she reminded me of exactly where I was, something as a dark-skinned girl, I never have the privilege of forgetting. But this stark reminder helped inform my passion for justice and advocacy.







Flaws disguised as perfection...the desire to be flawless morphed into heaviness and hurt. Holes consistently patched up, bandaids strategically placed over bullet wounds, a smile plastered over sorrow surrounding her thoughts of tomorrow. The flaws of flawlessness, she wants to be whole yet perfection eats away, she saves her sorrow for another day.

Personal Liturgy #4: P-a-r-a-d-i-s-e

After journeying through this semester
And having the absolute pleasure of
Encountering Toni Morrison's *Paradise*
I struggled to understand what Paradise actually meant
To the beautiful women from the Convent who I had come to admire
And whom I saw as extensions of myself.
Each of the women had such a unique impact on my understanding of the novel
And the discreet messages Ms. Morrison was essentially trying to convey.

I am so grateful for each and every one of them,
For Mavis's tenacity,
For Gigi's confidence,
For Pallas's bravery,
For Seneca's vulnerability,
Each of them represented a piece of me,
And I never knew how connected I would feel
To a novel that was entirely about women,
But through their trials and tribulations,
It was clear that each woman eventually made it to Paradise.

But what is Paradise for me, you may wonder?
Or maybe it is just me who wonders,
I think about it all the time.
An eight-letter word that speaks so many volumes,
A three-syllable word that encapsulates incredible significance,
Yet I am still unable to discern what Paradise looks like,
Or even feels like.
Maybe this is a good thing,

Maybe I am not supposed to feel or know the meaning of Paradise,
Maybe I am already living in it but I am just unwilling to accept it,
Or maybe Paradise is all a dream.

Maybe each of the Convent women were lied to about Paradise,
Especially since the audience was never provided with a concrete answer.

Wait, Malik – stop jumping to conclusions!

I know exactly where Paradise is.

It is within us.

Within every piece of us, every inch of us,

It's in the color of my eyes, the length of my fingers, the strength of my hands,

It's in the agility of my legs, the stability of my feet, the resilience of my smile,

The gentleness of my laughter,

The ease of my walk,

The optimism of my growth-based mentality,

The way I pray each night for God to watch over my loved ones.

Paradise resides within us.

It is not for us to completely understand,

It is not even for us to fully harness.

Paradise is achievable because it has been achieved.

By being Malik,

By embracing every aspect of Malik,

By valuing every piece of Malik,

I am embarking on my own version of Paradise,

And confidently leaving a legacy and path for those to follow behind.

Contributor Bios

Guest Editors

Miguel Kamgaing Kamgaing

Miguel Kamgaing Kamgaing (he/him) is a sophomore double majoring in Human and Organizational Development and African American and diaspora Studies. Miguel is passionate about the American educational system and its inequality. He believes in understanding the human problem within these inequitable systems and combining collective action and technical skills to counteract the deep-rooted discrimination of marginalized groups.

Hananeel Morinville

Hananeel Morinville (she/her) is a graduating Senior majoring in African American & Diaspora Studies and Latin American History. Hananeel is dedicated to racial and social justice as well as public service. Through her writing and leadership, she shines a spotlight on what it truly means to be Black in America—whether as a student, an activist, or a president. Her work bridges history, policy, and lived experience, challenging institutions to reckon with their role in shaping Black life and pushing for a future of true equity and justice.

Gabrielle White

Gabrielle White (She/Her/Hers) is a sophomore double majoring in African American and Diaspora Studies and Culture, Advocacy, and Leadership. Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, Gabrielle has developed a deep passion for exploring the intersections of advocacy, the Black experience, and the criminal justice system—especially in the American South. She believes in the power of recontextualizing the Black experience through Black Americans' lived experiences, anecdotes, and radical perspectives.

Contributors

Malik Clarke

Malik Clarke (He/Him/His) is a highly passionate, detail-oriented junior and social justice advocate studying Political Science & African American and Diaspora Studies on a pre-law track at Vanderbilt University. Growing up outside Atlanta, GA, Malik has always derived joy and passion from finding new ways to serve his community and empowering young Black men to lead while displaying authentic vulnerability. In addition to a raw passion for servant leadership, Malik channels his freedom of creative expression through poetry and prose detailing the queer Black male experience and redefining Black spirituality. Ultimately, Malik aspires to strengthen his creativity by utilizing his literary contributions to discover new strategies to foster cultural competence, DEI, and social justice in his personal and professional endeavors to earnestly serve

and uplift marginalized communities, particularly of the African and LGBTQ+ diasporas.

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz (she/her) is a freshman from Brooklyn, New York. Growing up in NYC has been immensely impactful, as there are so many illustrations of bold individualism to observe and be inspired by. She is currently thinking of double majoring in African American and Diaspora Studies and Culture Advocacy and Leadership. She loves to write poetry and song lyrics and collage, journal, and explore other avenues of self-expression.

Keyonte' Doughty

Keyonte' Doughty (He/Him) is a senior double majoring in Human and Organizational Development and Political Science. Born and raised in Tuscaloosa, AL, he is passionate about exploring how Black individuals are portrayed in media and the broader impact these representations have on society. He is particularly interested in the intersection of media, policy, and culture and how narratives shape public perception and systemic change.

N. Sierra Dix

N. Sierra Dix (they/them) is a senior double-majoring in African American & Diaspora Studies and Communication of Science & Technology. Born in Jacksonville, NC, and raised in Clarksville, TN, they carry a love for the South and the Black communities that shape its landscapes. Passionate about Black environmental restoration and resilience, Sierra explores the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and the environment in their academic and creative pursuits. They believe in the power of reconnecting with the land through a Black Southern lens and remains committed to fostering sustainable futures for their community.

Ade Forrest

Ade Forest (He/Him) is a senior double-majoring in Law, History, & Society and Cinema & Media Arts. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Ade is a passionate photographer and filmmaker who often centers his artistic projects around Black Americans and their multifaceted experiences. Through photography and filmmaking, Ade continuously experiments with storytelling, narrative structures, cinematography, and more. And, he regularly captures the daily lives of Black students on Vanderbilt's campus through Vanderbilt Fashion Week, photography sessions, and his involvement with Vanderbilt Media.

Sam Mitike

Sam Mitike (She/Her) is a junior double-majoring in Human & Organizational Development and Gender & Sexuality Studies. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Sam has a deep appreciation for storytelling and equity, especially concerning the narratives of Black queer youth. Through her continuous involvement with Vanderbilt Fashion Week, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and her senior photo project, Sam advocates for Black Vanderbilt students—and marginalized perspectives more broadly. Whether through her camera lens, essays, or leadership, Sam remains committed to amplifying voices and creating opportunities for underrepresented communities.

In partial fulfillment of requirement for AADS 4852

Professors Tracy Sharpley-Whiting and Gilman W. Whiting

