

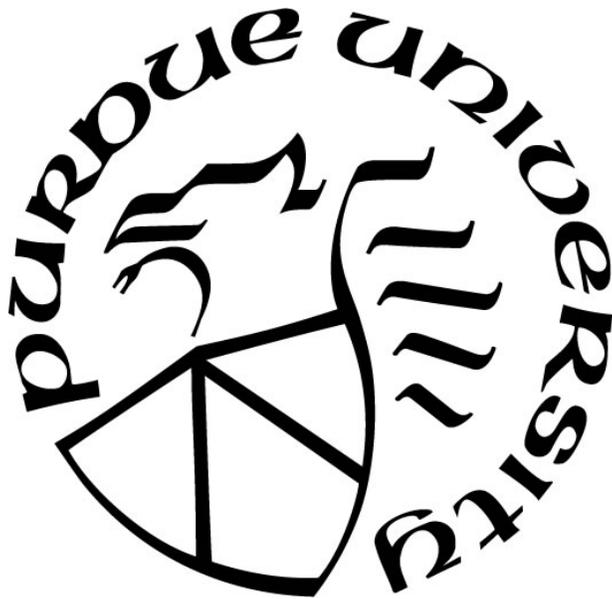
**THEORIZING BLACK WOMANHOOD IN ART: NTOZAKE SHANGE,
JAMILA WOODS, AND NITTY SCOTT**

by
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Carol Jirik, who may not always understand why I do this work, but who supports me and loves me unconditionally anyway.

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ABSTRACT

Black women are inventing new epistemologies to better fit their own experience, and they are putting these new ways of knowing into action within their communities to generate collective change through art. Black women's theories of their own lived experience publicly have been consistently limited by narrow definitions of what it means to create a "Theory." In this thesis, I will analyze the work of three contemporary Black woman performance artists, Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott, to identify the ways in which Black women do indeed theorize within these public spaces in ways that are innovative and complex. I focus on these artists insights on three critical sites: home, school, and community. I read Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, Woods' *Legacy!Legacy!*, and Scott's *Creature!* alongside Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* to explore the innovative theoretical spaces Black women have created in their art. Ultimately, I argue that acknowledging this process of using popular culture as a space for theoretical discourse can provide innovative tools for expression for Black women who do not, cannot, or do not wish to participate in academic discourses. Understanding these tools can empower Black women to explore their humanity and to understand the contexts, which Collins refers to as "domains," in which Black women can claim and expand their power.

INTRODUCTION

Black women's ability to theorize their own experiences publicly has been limited by narrow definitions of work that qualifies as "Theory." Black women, such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Angela Davis, have critiqued these boundaries from within and outside of academia. Literary critic Barbara Christian, in her essay "The Race for Theory," articulates the ways academic theory excludes Black women's intellectual contributions. She notes, "our theorizing, of necessity, is based on our multiplicity of experiences" in contrast to the theorists such as French feminists and new literary critics who shape "*authoritative discourse*" based on canonical theorists (italics in original, 76). Theorizing Black women's experiences takes a variety of forms and follows a lineage that is not always visible in this authoritative discourse. In this thesis, I will analyze the work of three Black women performance artists in order to investigate their insights on three critical sites: home, school, and community. To follow the editors of *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015), my analysis of these different locations of Black women's theory "draw[s] upon the innovative use of evidence and a broad range of sources" in order to disrupt the existing authoritative discourse by highlighting the various discussions of Black women's lived experience that occur in non-academic spaces (Bay et al. 4). In these spaces, Black women's theorizing is woven with lived experience and collectivity, which creates a more accessible and applicable mode of theory for Black women that can avoid being prescriptive. Ultimately, this theorizing in popular spaces using innovative methods can provide new expressive tools for Black women to understand their humanity and, as follows, to understand situations in which they can claim and expand their power.

Black women's community is central to my readings of Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott as contemporary theorists. My reading of their work is largely informed by Patricia Hill Collins' "group survival" as central to Black women's activism (217). These artists work within their communities and find ways to speak both to and for their communities as they investigate themes of home, teaching, and activism. Christian, Collins, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and many other Black feminist theorists provide frameworks for reading experimental texts as theorizing texts. Here, I use "theorizing" as a verb to demonstrate that these artists address Christian's "fear that when theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitish" (74). In emphasizing practice, I attempt to articulate the ways in which Shange, Woods,

and Scott root their observations and reflections about their place in the world in action. By “theorize,” I also mean to explore the ways in which Black women process through the points of oppression and points of power that intersect in distinct, but interconnected ways. Theorizing Black women ask questions about how they currently move through the world, how they want to move through the world, and what can bridge that gap. They live their theory by expressing their reflections about social structures and interpersonal relationships while also working with other Black women and building their reflections about the world together through writing, teaching, and community activism.

The togetherness of Black women’s theorizing can ultimately disrupt hegemonic ideologies by working against negative representations in art, teaching Black youth to embrace their humanity and creativity, and organizing against institutional structures of oppression. Stanlie M. James invokes “othermothering” to articulate the ways in which Black women take on these responsibilities: “Thus they [Black women’s forms of community othermothering] exemplify Ramphela’s conceptualization of power as a range of interventions that achieve outcome and should be viewed as potentially effective agencies for social transformation”¹ (James 51). When we read experimental texts in new ways, we can see new lines of theorizing that do not force Black feminist critics to find their way into the existing authoritative discourse of the “Theory” in order to engage in discourses related to their lived experience. Instead, they create new spaces altogether where they can participate in discourses that resist the dominant culture’s dehumanizing narratives while simultaneously validating their humanity.

Each section of this thesis will focus on a different theme that shows up in both the art and life of Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott. In the first section, I will articulate the importance of self-definition for Black women in their art, which I argue ultimately allows Black women artists and their audience to create a home for themselves in a traditionally unwelcoming space of popular culture. The following section builds on the first by exploring how, once a home is developed and acknowledged, Black women’s art can become a Black

¹ Othermothering is a term developed by Rosalie Riegler Troester in her essay “Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and ‘Othermothers’ in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.” The term is explained as “other adult women who help guide and form the young girl [who is struggling for independence], thus relieving some of the pressure on the mother-daughter relationship” (13). The term returns in Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* when she articulates how “African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible” (192).

feminist classroom for their audience. Each artists' music, visuals, and accompanying materials educate their audience. I argue that these methods of educating take their pedagogical inspiration from bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). In the third section, I focus on community activism by examining the work outside of the artistic materials of each of these Black women. I look at their engagements with their audiences and with Black people in their communities to understand each one of them within Collins' Black feminist activism framework laid out in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000). Lastly, in the conclusion, I highlight the ways in which hope is central to each artists' work by analyzing my own experience in a space that was at once a home, a classroom, and an activist community informed by Shange and facilitated by Woods and Scott.

Ntozake Shange was a poet, playwright, and activist of the Black Arts Movement who shaped Black Arts theater in New York. Shange had a BA from Barnard and MA from the University of Southern California in American Studies. Her experimental choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), is a foundational text for Black feminist literary criticism because of its emphasis on Black women within the Black Arts Movement. Diana Adesola Mafe notes Shange's intended audience. She writes, of both Shange and Lorraine Hansberry, that "these playwrights clearly write as/about/to black women" (31). The experimental structure of *for colored girls* as a choreopoem linking literature and performance is an example of the ways in which Black women adopt formal traditions to fit their theorizing needs. Harryette Mullen analyzes Shange and Alison Mills, the contemporary Black woman author of *Francisco* (1974), specifically because "their work exemplifies innovative practices rather than prescriptive theories of this movement to make art relevant to the experience of black people" (Mullen 206). It is precisely this innovation that pulls me toward Shange's drama as a source of Black feminist theorizing.

Jamila Woods is a Chicago-based singer, songwriter, and poet. Her second album, *Legacy!Legacy!* (2019) centers Blackness and works through current issues relevant to Black women such as education and elevation of marginalized Black women's voices. She holds a BA in Africana Studies and Theater and Performance Studies from Brown University. Woods released multiple videos for her songs from *Legacy!Legacy!*, and each of these videos incorporate familiar aspects of the music video genre while integrating documentary-style footage of Black women and students in Chicago along with references to other Black artists, both historical and contemporary. Woods was Associate Artistic Director of Young Chicago

Authors in 2016 and, based on the organization's website, it appears she no longer holds this position (Austen; "Our Team"). Woods' artistic work, along with that of many Black women, takes up the call of Shange as she continues to theorize Black femininity within and outside of the Black community.

Nitty Scott is a Brooklyn-based emcee whose work centers her own Afro-Boricua identity and focuses on establishing her own autonomous definition of her identity in forms, mediums, and languages that best articulate her lived experience. Scott centers her identity as an Afro-Boricua, queer, PTSD survivor in her performances and interviews. In contrast to Nicki Minaj, Scott's aesthetic has been described as "a mid-'90s naturalist" and "a wry, melodious and enunciative rapper" (Caramanica). Scott's album *Creature!* (2017) investigates Black women's identity from a global perspective as she theorizes the diasporic experience for Black women. *Creature!* is structured as a first-person narrative of a goddess-like woman who falls through a manhole in the Bronx and ends up in pre-colonial Puerto Rico. This protagonist explores the ways Black femininity has evolved over time and across space throughout the history of diaspora ("Nitty Scott - Millennium Stage"). Scott uses this narrative structure to share a story of Black womanhood while also addressing issues of colonialism and diasporic displacement in her lyrics and sounds to establish the various settings in this narrative.

I read these texts because their experimental nature allows for an analysis of innovation in Black women's theorizing while they also demonstrate the collective nature of that innovation. This is not to say there aren't many other artists who ought to be a part of this conversation: for example, the rapper, NoName, the poets, Danez Smith and Morgan Parker, and more mainstream artists like Lizzo and Beyoncé could be understood as theorizing the Black experience in their work. The three artists I have chosen ought not be left out of academic discourse simply because they are not considered academic theorists. This lack of acknowledgement stems from their dedication to theorists outside of the literary and cultural studies canon. Instead, they are participating in a rich discourse of their own among Black feminists doing their work in visual art, music, education, and community spaces. Since Shange, Woods, and Scott are writing in forms different from that of theorists like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, critics need to use more fluid and innovative methods of critique.

In these texts, I read three consistent themes that appear in distinct ways in each artists' work: the homes created for Black women in Black women's art, the theme of teaching and

learning, and the theme of Black women's community activism. These themes have all been theorized in academic writing by Black feminist intellectuals, but by incorporating musicians and performers and their experimental texts into these conversations, Black feminists and literary theorists can broaden the scope of and the audience for Black women's reflections on their own experiences. Shange, Woods, and Scott all approach these themes from their own unique positions to generate empowering representations of Black femininity while elevating marginalized voices and resisting institutional oppressions. Here, I will briefly identify the ways in which each of these themes are being explored.

First, I link self-definition with the sanctuary provided by a home to understand how these artists create spaces of sanctuary for themselves when society does not provide those spaces. By self-define, I mean a process of realizing and acknowledging one's humanity in order to develop their own self-image. This is a practice, an active process (rather than a stagnant object or goal to be reached) of developing one's self-image through observation, reflection, and explanation (the three actions that combine to define "theorizing" as I use it in this analysis). Self-definition, which I also refer to as self-realization, is the process of answering questions regarding one's place in society and one's place within their socially ascribed identity categories. For example, this means asking: What is a Black woman's place in society? What is an individual's place in a community of Black women? I combine this with the definition of home as refuge, ease, and security from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, with Collins' discussion of self-definition, and with Barbara Smith's discussion of home in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.

Collins explains that self-definition involves countering controlling images by "craft[ing] identities designed to empower them"² (108). This process of crafting empowering identities – identities in which Black women can feel humanized by articulating exactly what our experiences look like – is the self-definition that is necessary to generate what I call "homes," or places of refuge from oppressive discourses. Collins discusses the ways in which self-definition can be an empowering tool to resist the oppressive violence of racist society. This aligns with Smith's discussion of home. Smith focuses on the community within her childhood house. This

² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins explains that "controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (76-77). Rather than creating our identities in opposition to controlling images, Black women shape independent identities.

community was made up of Black women who helped her learn the process of self-definition. Smith's community allowed their house to become a home by cultivating her ability to explore the questions related to her own position within her family unit and within the larger society. I argue that the empowerment that results from discovering and articulating one's identity allows Black women to create their own spaces of refuge, ease, and security for both themselves and their communities.

Next, I look to bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* to analyze Shange, Woods, and Scott as Black feminist teachers creating their own counter-hegemonic classrooms in their art. *Teaching to Transgress* provides a framework for critical feminist pedagogy that we can see in practice in *for colored girls*, *Legacy!Legacy!*, and *Creature!*. hooks' text theorizes the experience of Black students, specifically Black girls, in the classroom. She uses her own experiences (reflection), notes the instructors she trusted (observation), and creates a plan of action to address the gaps between her needs and her own experiences (action). This overly simple, but useful three-step theorizing process is replicated in many Black feminist texts. The reflections and observations of Black feminist theorists do not just combine to make a new observation, but they combine to inspire some kind of action. The classrooms created in Black feminist art, like the homes described above, are figurative spaces where learning and exploration of innovative modes of expression can thrive. Black feminist classrooms are distinct from homes in that they facilitate learning and growth related to community and society rather than the self.

The Black feminist classrooms created in Black women's art are focused on providing Black students with the tools to theorize not only their own self-image, but also innovative and counter-hegemonic ways of changing the world. The necessity of self-recognition is evident in the creation of Black feminist classrooms. While a student does not need to have a fully formed self-image to participate in these educational spaces, an early processing of their self-definition can be a useful resource to bring with them as they begin to explore the society and culture in which they live. Some level of self-realization outside of the classroom can support students' learning within the classroom as they bring their developing identities with them. In the education section, I address education, not only as the larger system that often neglects Black students, but also as the more subtle ways that Black students and Black artists fill in the gaps created by the existing institution of education, thus filling out their Black feminist classroom spaces more than they can in other traditional classrooms. I link *Teaching to Transgress* with

“group survival” to demonstrate the ways that a community of Black women steps in to fill gaps left by systems that oppress and neglect Black women and Black students. For Shange, Woods, and Scott, teaching and education are inherently linked with lived experience and political consciousness. These values penetrate the “classrooms” they create in their work.

Third, I emphasize Collins’ “group survival” further to understand how Shange, Woods, and Scott are all Black women activists in varying ways. I look to their personal lives and their professional engagements with activism and organizing to understand how this, too, is rooted in community and Black women’s group survival. I read them as encouraging their audience to see themselves as activists and to see activist work as necessary as it contributes to the collective movement towards equity for Black women. In *for colored girls*, *Legacy!Legacy!*, and *Creature!*, I find evidence for Smith’s declaration that “The accomplishments of Black feminism have been not only in developing theory, but in day-to-day organizing... If nothing else, Black feminism deals in home truths, both in analysis and in action” (Smith xxxvii).

Lastly, in my conclusion, I look to hope as a common theme among these texts. This theme allows us to see how the first three sections, home, teaching, and community, can combine to create a humanizing and joyful space of relief from the dehumanization that is present in the institutions that shape American society. This common investment in hope points towards Black women’s innovation and resilience, and these artists provide a break from oppressive narratives and experiences in their work. The provided breaks can be necessary for Black women to re-energize and push forward in their commitment to collective liberation. Combined, these texts from Shange, Woods, and Scott, along with other Black feminist discourses in both academic and non-academic spaces, shape a practice of Black feminist theorizing that is exciting, energizing, and productive in the movement for larger social change.

BLACK WOMEN CREATING HOMES THROUGH SELF-DEFINITION

Perhaps that is why so many African-American women have managed to persist and “make a way out of no way.” Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.

—Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

Black women are inventing new epistemologies to better fit their own experience, and they are putting these new ways of knowing into action within their communities to generate collective change through art. Creating both independent and collective self-definitions is a necessary part of this process. First, one shapes an independent or individual self-image by processing through the answers to questions such as: What is *my* position within society and culture? What do I need and deserve? What do I need to do to make sure those needs are met? By beginning to process the answers to these questions, Black women begin to create “homes” for themselves. They then share these individual answers to shape a collective self-definition that becomes Black women’s standpoint, or the way Black women as a group understand their relationships to American society and culture as well as their own communities. For Black women, self-definition and security are interwoven. A sense of security can be one outcome of the process of self-realization. As a result, Black women can use their own processes of self-definition to establish a home, or a place of refuge and sanctuary for themselves and for their communities. Ultimately, I argue that Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott all create homes for Black women in their art, thus carving out more space in popular culture by facilitating a discursive refuge from dehumanizing narratives.

The two relevant definitions of “home” from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are: “A refuge, a sanctuary; a place or region to which one naturally belongs or where one feels at ease” and “A person’s own country or native land. Also: *the country of one’s ancestors*” (“home,” italics added). Most significant here, is the assumption of ease and the implication of being able to seek refuge in a home space. Because Black women are either invisible or dehumanized in much of popular culture, it becomes difficult to find homes in the narratives circulating in mainstream white culture. These dehumanizing narratives create a toxic space in which Black women’s humanity is constantly being challenged. As such, Black women create these homes for themselves by establishing a collective identity and validating and exploring that identity in their

art. When considering Black feminist theory, readers also need to consider the lineage that made space for the contemporary ideas and expressions of artists like Shange, Scott, and Woods. This lineage shapes a sanctuary for younger Black women to explore their own identities without surveillance from oppressive groups. Home can also exist as a place to return to, and, in the context of diaspora, a place that cannot be taken away. Black women can find home in Aretha Franklin's music and in Toni Morrison's writing: in existing Black feminist art that tells of another Black woman's exploration of her own experiences. In this analysis of contemporary Black women artists' creations of home within their art, I link Collins' theorizing about identity with the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions of home to understand the ways in which a sanctuary can be created for Black women through art.

Black women create homes within their art by setting examples and exploring the existing base of Black women's identities, not against existing controlling images but completely independent of them. In doing this, a sanctuary for Black women from the dehumanizing narratives is created for the viewer, reader, and listener. Early in her introduction to *Home Girls*, Barbara Smith notes the home as the place where she "learned the rudiments of Black feminism, although no such term existed then" (xxii). She explores the literal house she grew up in, but her dedication to Black feminism came from the other Black women who "worked harder than any people I have known before or since, and despite their objective circumstances, they believed. My grandmother believed in Jesus and in sin, not necessarily in that order; my mother believed in education and in books; my Aunt LaRue believed in beauty and in books as well; and, their arguments aside, they believed in each other" (xxiii). This belief in expression, observation, and "each other" allows Black women's homes to become collective spaces that can facilitate and inspire processes of self-realization. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the revolutionary potential of Black women's self-definition. She argues, "By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside of Black civil society but within African-American institutions" (111). The value of these safe spaces as Collins uses them is that they "are free of surveillance by more powerful groups. Such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women's independent self-definitions" (122).

Home, as I use the term, can be understood as a place where an individual can feel secure enough to articulate and investigate their humanity. For Black people, these spaces of refuge are

shaped by the community and collective identity. Some examples of literal Black homes are historically Black colleges and universities, beauty shops, church groups, and community centers, which recall Smith's family's dedication to Jesus, books, beauty, and each other. The feelings of security and a lack of surveillance in these spaces is reflective in more figurative homes such as Shange's choreopoem, Wood's music videos, and Scott's album. These artists engage their ancestry and their own stories of self-realization to establish homes for themselves. This connects us to the collective Black women's consciousness, and, as Collins explains; "Much of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a collective, self-defined voice and express a fully articulated womanist standpoint" (110). This womanist standpoint that emphasizes self-definition for and by Black women comes from Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" in which Walker examines the innovative ways Black women have expressed creativity and theorized the world around them.

Part of this innovation is evident in the experimental forms that Black women create for their art from Shange's choreopoem, to Scott's use of a magical realism narrative in her album *Creature!* to Woods' integration of music video and documentary in "GIOVANNI." These formally diverse ways of processing Black women's lived experience and sharing observations and reflections with the public in forms other than writing allow Black women to create a home for themselves as individuals and for Black women as a collective. Collins references Claudia Tate's "rearticulation" or "redefining social realities by combining familiar ideas in new ways" (130). Rearticulation allows for the shaping of a refuge that integrates existing Black feminist theories in new and accessible ways so even more women may have access to intellectual Black feminist communities. Understanding drama, dance, music, and music video as spaces to redefine social realities empowers Black women to "construct ideas and experiences that infuse daily life with new meaning" (Collins 122). Black women learn and speak in "a unique and authentic voice, women must 'jump outside' the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frames" in order to develop a self-image that is humanizing and whole (Belenky qtd. in Collins 110). In doing this, Black women work against internalized dehumanization that comes from controlling images and other structures of oppression.

For Black women impacted by various diasporic histories, home cannot always be a geographical or physical space of refuge or a literal connection to ancestors, but they can work toward collective and individual self-definitions that allow Black women to see ourselves, our

community, and our innovative art as our own sanctuary. Shange, Woods, and Scott build their own homes in their bodies and minds by identifying the forces that generate a sense of ease and refuge for themselves and their audience. In *for colored girls*, Shange sets up a pattern of self-realization for her characters. The choreopoem then follows the individual self-defining narratives that ultimately connect to a collective Black women's standpoint. Woods and Scott follow Shange's lead by centering their own self-realized identities from Scotts' Afro-Boricua identity to Woods' dedication to Black people in Chicago, her own geographical home. Shange's dedication to Black girls' access to the necessary tools for self-definition in "somebody anybody sing a black girl's song," one of the poems in *for colored girls*, Scott's exploration of a sanctuary within her own body in *Creature!*, and Woods' call to ancestry in "GIOVANNI" all balance individual and collective definitions of Black womanhood to shape homes protected from external structures of oppression.

All three of these artists first express a desire for home by theorizing the complexities of their processes of self-realization. Their self-defining continues from a tradition of Black women using creative spaces to humanize themselves. Collins and Angela Davis discuss the influence of Black women in blues music who pushed their own humanization into popular spaces to resist controlling images. Collins explains this development, "Blues was not just entertainment - it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of the working-class Black life in America" (116). These blues women were articulating their standpoint, and in doing so, they were pushing for their own homes into the unwelcoming space of popular music. Further, as Davis articulates in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, "Considering the stringent taboos on representations of sexuality that characterized most dominant discourses of the time, the blues constitute a privileged discursive site" (xvii). The blues created a place in which Black women could push their own narratives of themselves into a new area in which they could also communicate to and about one another. Thus, the blues became a discursive space in which Black women's standpoint was able to continue to evolve. Collins notes, "The issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives" (114). Using that community of listeners is one way to take advantage of the "discursive site" that the blues created in the music industry (Davis xvii).

This particular method of creating a space of community and communication between working-class Black people, particularly Black women, has had a lasting impact in Black art today. Shange, Woods, and Scott all, in their own ways, use their art to establish their participation within a larger community of Black women. Collins does not stop at collective self-realization but expresses how the blues worked for individual Black women. She argues; “Black women have also stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind in their blues” (123). Blues can be understood as a space for theorizing a collective Black women’s community or a Black women’s standpoint. This self-definition is still evident in contemporary Black music and art. Rather than arguing to be heard at all, contemporary artists are utilizing the space created by blues women and Black women writers of the early and mid-twentieth century to now create a home in their music for both themselves and other Black woman listeners.

Shange’s *for colored girls* is one foundational text that centers Black women’s process of self-realization in popular spaces, which eventually gets taken up by Woods and Scott. While Shange’s work is clearly a literary text, the intention of performance and the ways in which it has been taken up in popular culture and repurposed for film mark it as a text that participates in popular culture discourse. Enabling young Black women with the tools to shape their own self-image is central to Shange’s writing. As quoted in Collins, “Shange gives the following reason for why she writes: ‘When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves’” (Tate qtd. in Collins 115). This viewpoint centers Black girls’ autonomy in their own self-realizing. Shange specifically examines writing as a tool for self-defining, and she works both in and outside of her art to encourage an embrace of this expressive tool in young Black girls.

In her introduction to the 2010 Scribner edition of *for colored girls*, Shange creates a framework that allows readers to see the text as creating a home for Black girls. Shange reflects on the iconic phrase from work, “somebody anybody sing a black girl’s song”:

My students were predominantly black and brown with everything moving against them. One had so little sense of self, she turned in a poem by Nikki Giovanni as her own creation. I felt so close to these young women, I wrote that poem for them, my girls... I wanted these both girls and boys to represent themselves with honor and joy. (9)

Shange explicitly acknowledges this drive to create space for Black youth to shape their self-image. She also explains that “somebody anybody” became “the framing device” and “the anthem” in *for colored girls* (9). Since this poem is about recognizing and honoring oneself and it is the anthem of the text, the full text becomes a home because it provides a space of sanctuary in which Black girls can explore their own identities without fear of surveillance or stereotypes. As she reaches the conclusion of her introduction, Shange advises her readers, “In the mists and fog of life find your way to the rainbow by the sound of your own voice” (16). Once that voice is found, the ease and sanctuary located in a home cannot be easily taken away because the self becomes the home.

for colored girls allows Black women to understand the value of self-realization, even when they, as Shange notes, “have everything moving against them” (9). With desperation, the speaker of “somebody anybody sing a black girl’s song” begs the reader to do just that to “bring her out / to know herself” (18). This push to represent Black womanhood specifically for Black girls speaks to a longing for security and refuge. If Black women can represent themselves fully in public and popular spaces, then they might feel a sense of humanity in their own bodies and identities. Shange links home and identity by pointing out of the Black girl that “she doesn’t know the sound / of her own voice / her infinite beauty” (18). As such, singing a Black girl’s song and encouraging Black girls to know themselves becomes an opportunity to “let her be born” (19). Imagery of birth continues to show up in other poems and certainly did not begin with Shange in Black art; however, her use of birth as a relocation to a state of emotional ease and sanctuary can help readers understand how significant it is to be able to create home for themselves.

Sarah Appleton Aguiar is one scholar who looked to Toni Morrison’s use of birth imagery. She looks at birth and death as interwoven in *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997). Aguiar notes that birth and the often-following re-birth allow readers to see that to really be born, one has to acknowledge “the painful conditions of life” (513). Her analysis is particularly useful in analyzing the value of self-definition in Black women’s texts as she reads *Paradise*, arguing that “Mavis, Gigi, Pallas, and Seneca lack the gaze that defines the self, and in their static refuge within the Convent walls, this deficit of self-definition must, if they are to progress, be remedied” (517). This gaze, according to Aguiar’s analysis, would usually come from society, but in its absence, it is filled in the Convent by a guide who helps these women

self-define, not as a way of being born, but as a step towards dying. Shange's use of birth imagery is similar here in that the one that sings the Black girl's song is the guide who helps the women progress towards death. In this case, death is a hopeful kind of progress as it requires a full realization of life.

The Black girl in this poem is established as both an individual who needs to see herself represented, and, by the end of the poem, as a collective of Black women from Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Baltimore, San Francisco, Manhattan, and St. Louis (19). The geographical distances between these women become connected by a need to establish a definition of themselves. Cheryl Wall points to this complication in her analysis of Walker's and June Jordan's creative non-fiction, observing how "they register other examples of black self-hatred - including the mocking humor directed at black women on television - and lament the fact that even though they can now live anywhere, they have yet to find a home" (Wall 228). Shange's text implies that Black women are able to create their own refuge even when there is not a geographical center in which to physically unite. There's no central home, but *for colored girls* suggests that we can create a dispersed sense of security for ourselves through a dedication to both individual and collective self-definition. Shange's text pushes readers to create their own homes by defining their identity rather than allowing it to be defined for them. This continues in the work of Woods and Scott, who both create art that is influenced by Shange's structural experimentalism and the content of Black women's empowerment through the processing of their social position.

In *Creature!*, Scott focuses mainly on her independent self-realization to create a home in her lyrics, while the aesthetics of the album work to create a collective home for Black diasporic women. This is different from the way in which Woods establishes home in spaces like the Chicago arts community and her own familial relationships; however, both of these women articulate the ways in which their individual empowerment can contribute to Black women's group survival. Collins reminds us, in her own dedication to group survival, "When Black women's very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival" (123). Scott takes up one potential survival tool by articulating her own identity as existing within her body and her experiences rather than being defined by the group in power.

Scott uses the diasporic and intersectional aspects of her own identity, namely, her Afro-Boricua identity, her queerness, and her mental health journey to create an understanding of home that is tied to emotional sanctuary and ease as well as bodily autonomy. Scott references

being “born with Spanish Harlem in the palm of her hand” and asks, “what’s a place like me doing in a girl like this?” (“Negrita”/ “Pxssy Powah!”). Here body and home are united as the speaker is defined as both a girl and a place. At the same time, having Spanish Harlem “in the palm of her hand” implies a level of mobility that is not possible in geographical homes. Spanish Harlem (also called El Barrio) is a Puerto Rican cultural center and artistic sanctuary in New York City. The graffiti artist, Lee Quiñones, speaking from El Museo del Barrio, a museum and space for cultural learning in Spanish Harlem, reflects on his relationship with El Barrio, noting the art of the neighborhood as “a sanctuary,” “a comfort zone,” “a neighborhood of many temperatures” (Quiñones). As such, being able to hold this space of creativity and sanctuary in her hand as a diasporic Black woman becomes even more significant for Scott’s protagonist. If Black women claim their bodies as homes, then the impact of diaspora, while still deeply traumatic, becomes more surmountable through self-definition. Scott defines herself by entangling her own personal identity with the geographical spaces that are part of her own Blackness.

Scott connects these lyrics linking home with the body to a larger community of Black women and a history of reclaiming Black women’s bodies when she raps, “loving my pussy is a spiritual trait” in “Write!” Scott’s use of “pussy” identifies her genitals and her sexuality as a key part of her self-image, and she does this in a way that does not engage stereotypes, but instead positions her sexuality as one aspect of her full humanity. The song calls for the audience to take control of their body and sexuality and to link this control with self-definition. Scott’s song “For Sarah Baartman” builds on this theme, where Scott centers Sarah Baartman in the lineage of Black women who have not had control over their own bodies.³ “For Sarah Baartman” explores the dehumanization of being put on display as a commodity. In “Write!,” the following song, Scott responds to this objectification and abuse of Black women’s bodies by embracing the ways in which Black women *can* control their bodies. She does this by acknowledging Black women’s body’s ability to hold onto the spaces and cultures she moves through by “holding Spanish Harlem in the palm of [her] hand” and, in the song “La Diaspora,” “twerk[ing] to resist.”

³ Sarah Baartman was an early nineteenth-century Khoisan woman from South Africa who was kidnapped, enslaved, and put on display as a freak show in London and Paris. Her history is one that is often cited as an early moment of literal objectification and dehumanization of Black women’s bodies.

Like Shange, Scott also employs images of birth as she creates her own narrative of self-realization. Scott raps, “I been pregnant with a prophecy and can’t give birth / No I can’t give earth another piece of me / and I noticed they focus on taking peace from me” (“Write!”). Where Shange begs readers to “let [the black girl] be born,” Scott establishes the power of Black women to give or withhold birth. If Scott’s “prophecy” is her self-image, and she doesn’t want to give another piece of that image to earth, then it becomes even more important that she can self-define without having to fit into narratives established outside of a community of Black women. As such, she establishes her own bodily autonomy. If we read Shange and Scott’s references to birth together, we can see the empowering potential of Black women defining Black womanhood and sharing this power with new generations.

Scott’s investment in Black diaspora narratives combined with her definition of the body as the Black woman’s own sanctuary establishes a resistance to displacement as dehumanization. If the body is a home, then displacement cannot fully disrupt Black women’s ability to claim her own humanity. Scott holds the power of Spanish Harlem in her hand, and as such, she can’t be ripped away from it. Similarly, if a place is within her, then her geographical movement does not require her to leave her home behind. Claiming home within the body establishes bodily autonomy in a way that cannot be negated by existing structures of white supremacy that seek to objectify and dehumanize Black women’s bodies. Geographical displacement becomes less significant to both individual and collective empowerment when Black women can hold onto and create homes for themselves. Theorizing home in conjunction with power over Black women’s bodies allows Black women to establish personal control over their own narratives.

Beyond her lyrical theorizing of the embodied home for diasporic Black women, Scott develops an Afro-Boricua aesthetic combining natural animal sounds like the chirping of birds and the croaking of coquí frogs with the sounds that signify Spanish Harlem, such as police sirens and love-filled verbal battles between women. In reviewing this album for *Remezcla*, Amanda Alcantara points to the “organic textures” that shape Scott’s narrative of self-discovery. Where home can’t be established in language (English *or* Spanish - both languages of colonization), Scott uses sounds that connect listeners to “pre-colonial” spaces of ease and sanctuary - spaces that aurally replicate a refuge for many diasporic women (Alcantara). The sounds from flowing water and the *tumbao* - the rhythm played on bass and/or drums - to conversations in Spanish Harlem, and Spanish-influenced guitar all link pre-colonial with

postcolonial Black femininity through Black aesthetics. Scott rejects the notion that these aesthetic lineages can be erased by colonization, and as such, includes them in her own contemporary work. In the final song on *Creature!*, “Mango Nectar,” Scott combines African American hip hop with the indigenous chanting introduced in the song “Indígena” to establish a finale that emphasizes the contemporary multi-ethnic nature of diasporic Black femininity. Her finale brings us from a pre-colonial Puerto Rican home into an Afro Boricua-American home for Black women.

Woods creates sanctuary in her art that is deeply influenced by a collective Black women’s standpoint. Collective Black women’s standpoint refers to the way that individual self-definitions meet when Black women collaborate to process issues related to the groups position in American society and culture, the group’s needs, and the groups capabilities in meeting those needs. As Collins explains, “The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group-derived Black women’s standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” (109). Woods does not neglect the value of the individual self-definition Scott articulates. Instead, Woods theorizes the ways individual and collective Black women’s identities work in tandem to form the diverse while simultaneously unified Black American women’s consciousness. Woods takes on the responsibility of representing this “group-derived” standpoint by bringing together a diverse base of Black artists. In linking figures such as poet Nikki Giovanni, and the musicians and performers Eartha Kitt and Betty Davis, and by titling each of the songs in her album after these Black artists, Woods is able to focus on both individual self-images and communal traditions that have shaped Black women’s group identity. Woods creates a place of refuge in her performance because it can account for myriad Black women’s experiences while bringing those distinct experiences together in a community space.

For her own music, Woods grounds herself in Chicago as a geographic base much like Scott ties herself to Spanish Harlem. Woods makes a point to focus on how Black women in Chicago shape their own images. Her album explores home as both a place and as the group of women who helped her cultivate her own identity. In naming each song after Black figures who Woods refers to as “great greats,” she establishes a place of refuge for Black people in her own album (“BETTY”). As expressed in the songs “BETTY” and “SONIA,” home is not only space, but ancestry and history from community ancestors like Kitt, Davis, and Giovanni, but also

familial ancestors like her Mama and Joycetta (Woods' grandmother). This collective of women, as they are depicted in Woods' songs and videos, cultivated the possibility of self-definition for Woods throughout her life.

In "GIOVANNI," Woods declares a resistance to others' attempts to define her. She explains that this song took its inspiration from Giovanni's "Gemini" and "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)" (Asghar). As such, the song encompasses the essence of Giovanni's lines "I cannot be comprehended / except by my permission" (Giovanni lines 48-9; Anderson). Further, the song's influence from "Gemini," comes from its acknowledgement of "so many people who have put time and energy into making her who she is" (Jamila Woods qtd. in Anderson). This inspired Woods to include references to her mother and grandmother, singing, "Joycetta raised me, Mama burned sage for me. None can take that energy away from me" ("GIOVANNI"). Here, Woods declares her selfhood in a way that incorporates the women who contributed to her sense of humanity. Her own identity is born from that of the many women who artistically and personally inspired her.

Both "Ego Tripping" and "GIOVANNI" articulate Black women's confidence in a world in which, as Shange pointed out in her introduction, Black women have "everything moving against them" (19). Woods sings, "Permission denied to rearrange me / I am the Kingdom / I am not your Queen," claiming the power to define herself and resisting the hegemonic instinct to be defined in any other way. This connects to Scott's desire to give birth to her prophecy without giving "earth another piece of me" ("Write!"). These women are aware of the ways in which their images are taken up in popular culture and shaped to someone else's definitions, and they resist those external definitions by demanding their own through their art. Woods again references the subtitle to "Ego Tripping," "(there may be a reason why)," when she sings, "You got questions, I know that's right / There must be a reason why" ("GIOVANNI"). Further, the tone of the whole song mimics that of Giovanni's poem as it unapologetically embraces confidence. This sentiment, that Black women only have to answer to someone if they would like to, is a way to protect their own carefully realized identities. Woods puts Shange's dedication to youth into action by incorporating "Ego Tripping" into high school students' curriculum at Young Chicago Authors, an artistic organization for Chicago youth. Woods explains in an interview with *Pitchfork* that to establish the importance of confidence and self-definition that is present in the poem, she pairs "Ego Tripping" with Kendrick Lamar's "i" and

has “the students write a poem about how amazing they are” (Woods qtd. in Anderson). This is the way that art becomes activism just as it did for Shange. Woods is invested not only in sharing her own experience, observations, and analysis of the world around her, but also, she is invested in becoming a role model who, it could be said, “sings the black girl’s song.”

Ultimately, all three of these texts, *for colored girls*, *Creature!*, and “GIOVANNI,” and their respective author’s motivations as discerned from interviews and paratextual materials, point to the empowering potential of being able to create homes for Black women’s individual and collective self-definition. Within the texts, each artist takes their own humanity and makes it central to her narratives, thus creating a space of ease, refuge, and sanctuary where her readers and listeners can feel affirmed in their humanity. Even when readers have not yet been able to fully realize their own identity, they can find home in these artists’ work. For Shange home becomes apparent in her depictions of a Black girl’s search for refuge and through her articulation of Black women’s collective creation of sanctuary through not only her first poem, but also the choreopoem’s visual development of a collective rainbow of Black femininity. For Scott, home comes through a narrative of Afro-Boricua self-exploration and her creation of an aural landscape that integrates pre- and postcolonial aesthetics. Lastly, for Woods, home is created by reminding listeners and viewers of the tools their ancestors used to shape a cohesive Black women’s identity.

BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS AS BLACK FEMINIST TEACHERS AND THEORISTS

We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist coloni-zation.

-bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

Black femininity and the Black experience are largely neglected in contemporary United States public school classrooms. Contemporary artists respond to this issue by not only critiquing the absence of critical engagements with race and gender in teachings of history, but also by providing, in their artwork, the Black narratives that are missing in these US classrooms through their art. Artists like Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott embrace a critical feminist pedagogy within their works, and in doing so, they create and inspire positive counter-hegemonic learning spaces in which students are interactive and humanized participants in their own learning. They are providing an alternative to the educational experiences observed by activist Imani Bazzell and many other Black students:

After years of this yo-yo-ing between schools of greater and lesser resources, I came to know, not just from reading books, but through lived experience, that we are all smart. However, our ability to express our brilliance is often shaped by the expectations people with power have over us and the educational opportunities they are willing to provide. (14)

Using bell hooks' mode of critical feminist pedagogy outlined in *Teaching to Transgress* combined with Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of the collective actions of Black women toward "group survival," I read Shange, Woods, and Scott as radical teachers as well as pedagogical theorists to understand how their art combined with their community work provides radical and revolutionary educational spaces, which I refer to as "Black feminist classrooms" for the purpose of grouping a variety of experiences into a broader educational structure for Black students, specifically Black girls (Collins 217).

Black musicians have a long history of engaging with education in their work. From Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" to Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Black people have been acknowledging the active role of the Black student in their own

education as well as imagining educational spaces that allow for Black students' lived experience outside of the classroom. Outside of music, Black people's history of fighting for rights to education in a variety of ways from learning to read and write even in slavery when the consequences were life-threatening, to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and student activism during the Civil Rights Movement, through the Black Power Movement's work to raise Black consciousness and through contemporary activism fighting for equitable educational opportunities for Black students in Chicago ("The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement"). This legacy of education-focused activism and art continues in contemporary Black art, and Black teachers explore the necessary pedagogical methods to do so.

Shange, Woods, and Scott can be added to this lineage of Black musicians who take on the role of teachers engaging with educational inequities by using art to fill in the many gaps left by the structural neglect of Black students. Shange sets a tone for a feminist engagement with students through art with her poem "toussaint," which follows a young Black girl on her search for self and her ancestors' history by challenging the boundaries of educational institutions such as her town's library. Woods uses the lineage of Black musicians engaging with these inequities by explicitly discussing education inequities in her song "OCTAVIA" and her music video, "BALDWIN." These songs, along with much of Woods' creative work speaks directly to the neglect of Black students specifically in the Chicago Public School system (CPS). She specifically addresses how inequities were amplified following the budget crisis observed during the 2015-16 school year (Farmer, et. al., "Closed by Choice"). Woods' art criticizes CPS's neglect of Black students while also creating a tone of hope by imagining Black educational spaces that are free, not only from these structural inequities, but also from white people altogether.

Lastly, I look at the function of storytelling in contemporary music through Scott's *Creature!* as well as her engagement with educational inequities on Instagram to understand what it means to place Black people within narrative structures and spaces from which Black women have traditionally been excluded. *Creature!* is structured as the narrative of an Afro-Boricua woman who is transported to a pre-colonial past in Puerto Rico and goes on a journey through her own diasporic identity. These texts, "toussaint," "OCTAVIA," "BALDWIN," and *Creature!*, do not simply place Black people in white narratives. They also demonstrate how Black language and culture, when communicated through a Black feminist pedagogy, can

cultivate learning for Black students in ways that other methods cannot. The texts and the artists ultimately highlight the need for educational opportunities for Black students in both formal institutions and communal informal interactions. This, too, brings us back to a process that facilitates group survival through individual action and communal learning.

In hooks' introduction to *Teaching to Transgress*, she articulates a critical pedagogy that ultimately centers both the students' and the instructors' lived experience, hope, and excitement. The classroom space, for hooks and other critical feminist teachers, is inherently political, and students' voices, subject positions, and politically informed experiences are important factors in the classroom environment. hooks' pedagogical methodology stems from her early educational experience in all-Black schools of which she reflects, "we learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (2). This counter-hegemonic process continues in the work of Shange, Woods, and Scott, particularly through an emphasis on excitement. hooks discusses "excitement" as one goal of effective pedagogy. In this excitement, she writes, "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks 12). Excitement, reflexivity, and resistance are all central to Shange, Woods, and Scott's respective teaching strategies. As such, their students - their listeners, readers, and viewers - are encouraged to embrace their own autonomy with regard to counter-hegemonic resistance.

Shange's explicit discussion of education in her introduction to *for colored girls* is not the only evidence of her investment in educating Black students in a way that is unique to their lived experience. In "toussaint," Shange's young speaker explores her position in diaspora, much like the protagonist in *Creature!*. Both the speaker in "toussaint" and the protagonist in *Creature!* search for freedom in movement, but ultimately through learning they both understand that they can and must create their own freedom wherever they end up. Shange's poem begins with "de library" as a central educational space for the speaker. "toussaint" is written mainly in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and as such, references to "pippi longstockin'" and "pioneer girls & magic rabbits" feel further out of place for the speaker (Shange 40). These characters, recognizable to white readers, do not speak to the young Black girl's lived experiences. Even when the books in the children's section did show Black people, they fell into tokenism. For example, when she encounters George Washington Carver, she is not interested, apparently because she "didn't like peanuts" (40). Within the poem as a whole, especially after

the earlier white literary references, this parenthetical acknowledgement of Carver poses a critique of tokenism in literary and educational spaces. By this lack of interest, Shange implies through her speaker that tokenism is not the same as education, and what Black students need and crave is that very education that is missing. Karlyne Killebrew, another Black student, uses her University's student publication to reflect, "Knowing who Dudley Randall was and Larry Neal... these are people that I got a hold of when I was like fifteen or sixteen. I learned nothing about them in school. The only woman that I learned about in school was maybe Maya Angelou. Really because of my drama teacher because they brought "for colored girls,"" (Killebrew). The issue of the absence of Black educational materials in existing educational institutions is also one that further impacts young Black girls. Even the speaker in "toussaint" finds herself a new classroom through a Black man, Toussaint L'Ouverture⁴ rather than a woman.

The speaker in "toussaint" does not have her subject position as part of the classroom provided by the children's reading section of the library. As such, she leaves to find a more useful space for her own learning. She centers herself in her learning even when the educational structure does not center her. In doing so, she finds much more intriguing sources in the "ADULT READING ROOM," where she meets Toussaint L'Ouverture in a history book. She eventually decides to leave home to go to Haiti with her imagined Toussaint, and this decision brings her face to face with Toussaint Jones, a young Black boy in her own community. Toussaint Jones, just like L'Ouverture, "don't take no stuff from no white folks" (44). This statement from Jones allows the speaker to see how radical spaces free from whiteness can exist in her own relationships in her own city. Her explanation that this meeting of Toussaint L'Ouverture "waz the beginnin uv reality for me" highlights the uselessness for her as a Black student, of the children's literature she had consumed thus far. This young girl has an experience that Alice Walker has reflected on in her own writing of her short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,"⁵ "In that story I gather up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity" (qtd. in

⁴ Haitian military leader known for leading the Haitian slave revolution in the late eighteenth century. For more information on L'Ouverture, see Bell.

⁵ A story inspired by Walker's mother (Wall 223).

Wall 224). Those earlier narratives and characters were not real to the speaker of “toussaint” because they did not teach her anything about herself.

As hooks argues, the student - the young Black girl in this case - needs to have their subject position with them in the classroom. When the provided classrooms (the children’s reading section of the library) fail her, the speaker of the poem moves to another more welcoming classroom where she does not need to leave her subject position at the door. In this new classroom - first the adult reading room and then her own city - the speaker can ask analytic questions about her experiences that allow her to deepen her understanding of the world itself, in other words, she can begin to theorize. Thus, she learns to resist hegemonic educational structures and finds her own productive classroom in the world. By telling this story, Shange creates this classroom for her readers. The poem itself provides the very educational experience that the poem’s speaker was searching for - an experience that allows the reader, particularly the Black reader, to become an active student in a classroom that welcomes their lived experience.

The young girl’s meeting of a Black ancestor in order to catalyze a transition to a Black feminist classroom is a pattern that continues in the work of Woods, whose album, *Legacy!Legacy!*, is organized around the notion of learning from the messages of Black “greats.” Woods’ album uses education from formal institutions as well as knowledge gained from family and community members as a theme to articulate her own version of a Black feminist classroom in the “BALDWIN” music video. The form of this classroom in the music video is a perfect example of the music video as Black art. Alessandra Raengo and Lauren McLeod Cramer, taking inspiration from a conversation between Mark Anthony Neal and Uri McMillan, articulate Black music videos as “unruly archives” wherein the Black music video “self-consciously uses visual and sonic citations from various realms of Black expressive culture” (Raengo & Cramer 138). Raengo and Cramer encourage Black scholars and critics to engage with this art in a way that meets its formal complexity. Rather than analyze the music video as a hybrid of music and video, they encourage us to read using a “liquid methodology,” “an untraditional historiography that follows the work’s complex references and is just as improvisational as the rich history of sound culture that sustains it” (139). To refer back to the introduction, this is a more specific articulation of Barbara Christian’s call for a more flexible methodology that meets the needs of the object of analysis. Given these analytic strategies, I read “BALDWIN” for its references to

other Black art at the same time as I read it for its construction of a revolutionary Black feminist classroom.

Woods creates an unruly archive in “BALDWIN” by incorporating elements of Black visual art with Black music traditions, Black literary traditions, and Black fashion to create a music video that articulates the complex lineage of Black art into the contemporary moment. Woods uses the “unruly archive” in her music video to create a literal classroom for Black students. She, like Shange, does not stop there and pushes this further by also providing a classroom for her Black viewers and listeners who can experience a unique method of teaching that embraces their subject position and centers relatable experiences in the narrative. Woods also embraces hooks’ pedagogical focus on excitement in the classroom. The visuals in “BALDWIN” are full of magic and joy as the students and teachers alike are smiling and dancing together as they learn.

Woods sets up a transition into “BALDWIN,” within the album by referencing James Baldwin’s “If Black English Isn’t A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” in her song “OCTAVIA.” As such, I will analyze the songs together before fully transitioning into the analysis of the music video. While “BALDWIN” critiques educational spaces and creates a new Black feminist classroom in which Black students are central, “OCTAVIA” provides a more theoretical way for individual Black students to embrace autonomy in their own educational experiences. “OCTAVIA” appears directly before “BALDWIN” on the album, thus setting up a hopeful envisioning of the future, which the music video for “BALDWIN” then realizes. Using work from the author and theorist, Baldwin, and contemporary Afrofuturist author and theorist, Octavia Butler as inspiration, Woods critiques the structures of formal education that exclude Black narratives in history and contemporary literature. Baldwin’s legacy of writing the Black experience combined with Butler’s Afrofuturist literature allow Woods’ listeners and viewers to be exposed to the work of these “greats,” while also invoking their respective artistic values. This is just the beginning of her creation of an unruly archive in her music video.

Woods is specifically using these ancestors to address the extended neglect of Black students provoked by the CPS budget crisis in 2015. As Chicago worked to address this budget crisis, they closed schools in highly populated urban (read: Black and Latino) neighborhoods while simultaneously opening charter schools in areas with decreasing populations of school-aged children, mainly suburbs (Farmer, et. al.). Stephanie Farmer, Ashley Baber, and Chris D.

Poulos analyze CPS budget strategies, ultimately concluding that “Education insecurity is the product of the school reform agenda focused on cannibalizing the neighborhood public schools in order to convert CPS into a privatized “choice” school system” (11). Because of Chicago’s dense population of people of color combined with the city’s high levels of segregation, this choice system means less access and more difficult access to education for Chicago’s Black students. Woods is not the only artist to address this particular system’s inequities. Chance the Rapper, with whom Woods has collaborated multiple times, has donated \$1 million to the schools to attempt to financially back his declarations that the Black students in these schools need more support from the public-school system (Schmidt).

Woods’ “BALDWIN” music video takes on the role of addressing the students’ concerns via interviews and imagining a classroom in which those concerns would be met. Early in “OCTAVIA” Woods sings, “Don’t ever let ‘em knock the way you talk, the language you evolve, your natural genius.” She alludes to Baldwin’s essay, in which he writes, “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate” (132). She pulls the threads together in “OCTAVIA,” combining the Afrofuturist envisioning of a Black classroom with Baldwin’s theorizing to emphasize the complexity of Black literary lineage. Here, even before moving into the music video medium, Woods is already beginning to use her work to create a Black archive. Her invoking of the control of Black people to “evolve” a language uses the very language that Black people have evolved, a language that requires words entangled with musical and visual aesthetics.

The video for “BALDWIN,” becomes a more direct critique of CPS’s failures to adequately educate its Black students. The music video spends time creating a visual representation of the Black feminist educational space that is theorized in “OCTAVIA.” The viewer first encounters a direct quote from Baldwin: “Your crown has been bought and paid for. All you have to do is put it on your head” (“BALDWIN (Official Video)”). This quote within the context of the song and video’s educational theme suggests that Black students come from a lineage of learning in innovative ways and that they must value and center themselves in their educational experiences in order to embrace this lineage. The visuals then move into a variety of scenes both in and outside of a Chicago school where Black students, poets, and artists are learning from each other and embracing the excitement and possibility within the classroom.

Throughout the video we move in and out of that imagined classroom until the song itself ends and we are transported to a new setting in which CPS students are being interviewed about their own experiences and needs. These students reflect on their experiences in a variety of ways. One student notes the issues with focusing on facts, explaining their desire to “get to know yourself... Our feelings are very important, and they should be prioritized over what they [those controlling the curriculum] think should be prioritized.” Another student notes the fact that their textbooks are “whitewashed and outdated” (“BALDWIN (Official Video)”). By providing a space for these students to share their reflections on their own experiences in CPS, Woods is not only sharing her own theorizing of how education should look, but she is sharing evidence from those who we should be listening to when we, as academics, ask ourselves questions about curriculum and student needs.

The choice to include the faces and voices of actual students brings the viewer back to the reality of the school system after they have seen the possibilities of a Black feminist classroom, and it centers the Black students as actively analyzing that reality.⁶ The viewer is directly confronted with these students’ reality, and as a result is called to action. Here, Woods brings together theory and lived experience. For Woods, just as for hooks, the classroom ought not and cannot separate learning from the living of the Black experience. The video acknowledges and critiques the system’s existing inequities after using magical realism to demonstrate the potential for a system that actually speaks to the needs of the students.

Once the recorded song begins in the music video, Woods repeats a declaration that the song returns to throughout: “You don’t know a thing about our story - tell it wrong all the time.” This is followed by “My friends been reading the books by Morrison and West,” which further archives the work of Black greats, Toni Morrison and Cornel West, which directly articulates the discrepancies between curriculum and students. We can assume, based on the rest of the album, that “you” is white people who attempt to share Black stories and fail (or - potentially - those who don’t tell our stories at all). This is juxtaposed by “my friends,” an “us” who reads the people who *can* tell our stories well. Woods’ lyrics continue: “all my friends wanna know why you ain’t figured it out just yet, reading the books, reading the books you ain’t read”

⁶ Woods similarly incorporates documentary-style discussions with Black women in her video for “GIOVANNI.”

(“BALDWIN”). Thus far, Woods incorporates references to Black writers, and this particular lineage is certainly not all that unruly, however, upon further analysis, the viewer observes a repetition of visuals such as dancing women in solid colors, connecting us to *for colored girls* and invoking a sense of Black women’s embodiment and community, such as paintings of and by Frida Kahlo, and imagery that mimics contemporary Black artists’ depictions of Black people in *The Last Supper*. These images work together, not only to establish an unruly archive in which Black art of past and present is cited throughout, but also to imagine the aesthetics of a Black space that truly embraces this variety of artistic lineages.

In this complex web of references to other Black artists, Woods generates a theory of Black education by placing Black people in the places they have been left out of and asking what they need in those spaces. The first scene of the video introduces continued references to *Harry Potter* as the name “Jamila Woods” appears in the familiar large, gold, lightning-bolt font. These references are notable because the famous series by J. K. Rowling has faced much criticism for its lack of racial diversity as she retroactively builds more diverse characters into the series canon (Anne; Milvy). The students in the first scene push carts full of books, notebooks and writing utensils as they magically run through the wall of their school building. They emerge in a classroom full of Black people - students and teachers, exploring different lessons in Blackness.⁷ *Harry Potter* references continue in images of a room under the stairs and a large feast, which also connects viewers to *The Last Supper*. By referencing *Harry Potter*, but using a Black cast and Black aesthetics like afros, wigs, and jazz music, Woods makes a statement about the “magic” that can happen when Black people are included in popular narratives. She places Black people at the center of a known white narrative. Much like the young girl in “tousaint,” Woods is revising the curriculum to fit the students’ lived experience.

Once we enter the classroom, the first class we see is one on the topic of hair. Visuals include students combing through wigs and using hair picks to follow the lines of their textbooks, all while embracing the excitement in the room glowing in magical sparks and stars throughout the classroom from the instructor and students alike. In this setting, the students are encouraged to explore themselves and be themselves without dealing with outdated textbooks

⁷ This is another reference to a moment in *Harry Potter* where the protagonists get to their own magic-infused educational space of Hogwarts by running directly through a brick wall on a train platform in London.

and lessons that do not acknowledge their reality. In this scene, Woods creates a space where the students' needs are met. The classroom poses an opposition to whitewashing: a sort of Black educational haven in which the material, educators, and the peers are all Black. This is Woods' imagined Black feminist classroom. As the student at the end of the video explains, their feelings and their humanity are central to this imagined classroom environment. Woods employs a Black feminist pedagogical framework in her art by creating this educational space of counter-hegemonic learning.

Beyond the classroom that serves as the audience's entrance to the school, viewers are also given multiple visuals in an auditorium, which demonstrate the inseparable nature of art and education for the Black community. The theorizing and creating are happening in the same spaces. This scene, set up as an allusion to *The Last Supper*, includes Black people in a single row behind a long, food-adorned table. The people in this room all appear to be adults, and within the narrative of the video, they fill the role of administrators and teachers in the school. The people participating in this scene are Black artists from Chicago, some of whom can be identified as spoken-word poet, Raych Jackson and National Youth Poet Laureate, Kara Jackson. It is significant, then, that they are in an auditorium rather than an office. They are in a space of creativity, expression, and emotion as they prepare to teach the students represented in the classroom. The emphasis of this scene is on art and expression with bright colors in the casts' fashion, bright food on their red table, and colorful paintings and images in the background. As mentioned before, part of this background in the auditorium is a circle of Black women in solid colors. These women dancing can be read as an allusion to *for colored girls* as they take up the space of the stage and each wear their own distinct and identifiable color. If these are to be read as the people in control of the school, the school would most certainly fit the needs expressed by the students' respective interviews. Through her music video, Woods tells a story of a world that could exist if politicians and activists were both listening to and advocating for Black CPS students.

Like Shange and Woods, Scott interrupts existing white formal conventions by creating a narrative of diaspora that embraces elements of magical realism, hip hop, poetry, and nature. For Woods, storytelling happens within individual songs as she uses ancestry to address different themes of Blackness. In Scott's *Creature!*, the album itself creates a narrative for Black diasporic women. The album starts with the introduction of a protagonist, a Black woman who has been

transplanted from present-day in the Bronx to a pre-colonial Puerto Rico. Throughout the story, this protagonist travels throughout diasporic spaces to find herself and understand her power in each respective space (“Nitty Scott - Millennium Stage”). As Amanda Alcantara observes, “her new album is a storybook narrative that easily fits into the genre of magical realism, as told by an Afro-Boricua americana” (Alcantara). This narrative can also be analyzed as the protagonist learning to hold each diasporic space within her. As articulated in the first section, home resides within rather than outside of her, the Black diasporic woman.

Scott begins to create a feminist historical archive in her album. References throughout the album to *Genesis* and *Alice in Wonderland* combine with references to Pussy Riot and allusions to the murder of Sandra Bland. These intersect with the unique narrative form and the melding together of Spanish and English, singing, rapping, natural sounds, and conversations to disrupt existing storytelling narratives, which have so often worked against Black diasporic women. As Baldwin writes, “Black English is the creation of the black diaspora... *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey*” (133, italics in original). Scott is truly changing the language to fit the reality it must convey; She is finding her own curriculum and creating texts that better reflect her reality for her own audience. Expanding from Woods, Scott amplifies her Afro-Boricua identity by incorporating Spanish into her lyrics so she can convey the reality that is distinct from that of African American women. Since her experience is not reflected solely by AAVE or by Spanish or by pre- or postcolonial sounds, she combines them all and illustrates for her reader yet another type of Black feminist classroom, which is flexible and changes to fit the needs and subject positions of its students and teachers.

Like Woods’ references to *Harry Potter*, Scott establishes a traditional form of narrative in which a protagonist is born and explores new surroundings, but she changes the form to fit the Black experience. She gives us this narrative through music and uses the sounds of coquí frogs and running water to set the scene rather than relying only on language. The new narrative space she creates allows Black people and Black narratives to be central. The Black diasporic woman is the hero on her journey through the history of colonization. She is finding new ways to understand her own identity, and along the way she is learning without the confines of traditional educational institutions. Her experiences are her own Black feminist classroom.

This self-teaching through experience is also reflected in Scott's innovative use of Instagram captions. She uses that social media space to write long-form comments that function for her followers as consciousness-raising educational material. In one post from July of 2019, Scott shares the complexities of her experience visiting a cotton plantation in the American South. Scott provides information for readers through the images in her post consisting of cotton, various spaces in the home, and the outdoor spaces (likely leisurely spaces for the white family rather than the spaces where slaves would have been held). She then provides her own analysis of her experience as a version of curriculum for her followers. She writes:

after paying the admission fee to the white lady at the front (where exactly does all this money go? and was I really just charged for access to this education as a black person?), we proceed to walk the grounds & the big house with a guide who cheerfully shares fun facts & tea about the rich family who originally lived there, mostly glossing over the horrors that made it all possible. (@nittyscottmc)

By “tea,” here, Scott brings a colloquial term for gossip into her educational space, again allowing her identity and that of her students to flood the educational material. Here, Scott is the young Black girl in “toussaint” in that she is using her own experiences to fill in the gaps left by a white educational situation on the plantation itself. She uses her own subject position as a Black woman on the plantation to make the experience relevant and important for her followers who, in this moment, become her students.

These women are not teachers in a vacuum. They were each taught by their own communities of Black women. Woods discusses the influence of her grandmother, Joycetta, in her art, reflecting, “I think of all the things she taught me through her language, but also through her actions. She’s the first poet I knew. Before I knew who Lucille Clifton was, I knew about economy of words just through how my grandma talked. I want people to know her name, and I want to communicate the things she taught me” (Asghar). While Woods was inspired by her grandmother, Scott engages with the Black community by discussing the plantation experience with the other Black visitors. Scott writes, “after an afternoon of side eyes, all the black people in the tour group naturally got to talking afterward & one of the women said to me that she frequently tours plantations & has learned that the experience varies depending on who runs the grounds” (@nittyscottmc). Here, the learning happens together. Pedagogical values inspired by hooks and Collins are present in discursive spaces beyond the classroom - in music, in music video, in artistic community spaces, and in popular literature. When existing classrooms do not

provide the necessary structure and curriculum for Black students, Black women create their own classrooms in popular culture, whether in choreopoem, music video, album, or Instagram post. This impulse to teach when traditional teaching structures are not working comes from Black women's constant work towards group survival. To reiterate hooks' pedagogical values; The classroom is a revolutionary space. These artists embrace their communities as well as the revolutionary potential within that space.

BLACK WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN AND BEYOND THEIR ART

None of us are free, but some of us are brave. I dare you to shrink my wave.

—Jamila Woods, “ZORA”

Any reading of these texts from Ntozake Shange, Jamila Woods, and Nitty Scott would be incomplete without a discussion of their efforts to share information, participate in movements, and organize activist spaces. Patricia Hill Collins seeks to redefine Black women's activism in *Black Feminist Thought*. Much like Barbara Christian's critique of academic “Theory,” Collins defines an activism that is not defined in a prescriptive way, but rather can be read for its value in a wide variety of ways including, and perhaps most importantly, being read by those with the lived experience (Christian 68). Collins expresses the necessity for “struggles for group survival” just as much as “confrontations with institutional power” (217). Instead of a definitive explanation of Black women's activism, Collins uses the phrase as an invitation for “diverse African-American women to see how their current or potential everyday activities participate in Black women's activism” (219). For Collins, activism is rooted in “group survival,” which, as has been demonstrated in Shange, Woods, and Scott, becomes a consistent underlying theme of contemporary Black feminist art - a theme that allows for an expansion of modes of theorizing as well as a recognition of activist work beyond institutional confrontation.

While Shange, Woods, and Scott have larger platforms that allow them to engage with institutional systems of power, their work pushes forward the notion of individual Black women's activism, thus inviting more and more Black women to see themselves as activists in their lives. They simultaneously participate in these “struggles for group survival” in educational spaces while also confronting institutional power by working with community organizations and using their platforms to discuss issues related to Black women's contemporary oppressions. The simultaneous use of these elements of activism serve as an example for other Black women with platforms who see themselves as artists and activists. Further, all three of these artists come from and acknowledge communities of activism and creativity that they explicitly discuss within or alongside their work. I read Shange's *for colored girls* as a call to action for Black women artists in the contemporary moment to live out the messages in their art in whatever way they can. Woods and Scott using platforms on social media and in their communities, have taken up this

call. As they do so, they provide a visible and accessible form of Collins' theories to a different audience.

for colored girls still inspires young Black women to organize within their communities and to see themselves as powerful and autonomous. Within the choreopoem, "I'm a poet who" provides an artistic grounding for Collins' understanding of group survival in that the struggle of documenting her experience is noted by the whole group even after the first-person narrator opens the poem. After the speaker and the rest of the group begins to dance to "Che Che Cole" by Willie Colon, the group starts speaking as one: "our whole body / wrapped like a ripe mango / ramblin whippin thru space" (29). They all agree, "we gotta dance to keep from dyin," and by the end of the poem, the group becomes more outwardly focused as they all take on the persona of the speaker who has "come to share our worlds with you" (30). The group ends the poem together, even though it began with a singular speaker. The main action, that of sharing the truth they've discovered together, cannot be done by the initial singular speaker. Instead, the collective takes on the responsibility of self-representation. These women who take up the original speaker's battle with self-definition are Black women activists who take on the role of community organizers by engaging others who are in the same position as them. This type of coming together exemplifies the centrality of community and group survival to Black women's activism. For these reasons, *for colored girls* is recognized as not only challenging racist systems of power, but also "contest[ing] the rising masculinism of the Black Power era" (Springer 118). Shange provides an illustration of Black femininity as a necessity within movements fighting institutional oppression. As such, the work becomes a symbol of the organizing Shange was a part of during the Black Arts Movement.

Outside of her foundational choreopoem, Shange worked with Black students and Black organizations to establish herself as an activist challenging institutional structures of power. In her introduction to the choreopoem, Shange discusses her work with Black youth at Long Beach Upward Bound. This is the work of shifting ideologies and generating confidence in Black people. In addition to engaging with young Black woman students, Shange was also involved with cultural organizations like The Third World Women's Collective (Shange 10; Ward). This involvement in cultural organizations, particularly a collective of women of color, demonstrates the ways in which Shange truly lived her theory and lived the Black feminist values present in *for colored girls*. Her dedication to these values is still evident in Black women's art and

activism today from young college students to artists like Woods and Scott. Just one example of this lasting impact is The for colored girls Project coming out of the University of Wisconsin - Madison. According to the university's news, "Activism is central to the mission of The for colored girls Project, a theater ensemble made up of a rotating cast of women of color. Named after a 1975 choreopoem by Ntozake Shange, the group navigates intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability through the varied talents of its members" (Brooks). Groups like this, just like Woods and Scott, have taken up Shange's call in her choreopoem and in her life's activism to continue to push against systems of power by coming together through expression.

Woods is also known for her institutional activism in her hometown of Chicago. Her activism is explicitly incorporated into her art, as established in the reading of "BALDWIN" in the previous section. Calls to disrupt institutional structures of oppression are also present in "ZORA," the song from *Legacy! Legacy!* named after Zora Neale Hurston, herself a Black woman artist disrupting the norms of her own time. In "ZORA," Woods gestures toward Collins' Black woman activists. She sings, "I may be small, I may speak soft, but you can see the change in the water," to acknowledge the ways that everyday activism from Black women can make a significant and lasting change. She also uses this song to further assert her self-definition as she sings, "little boxes, on the hillside, little boxes / you can't stick onto me" and "you don't know me so you up the creek" ("ZORA"). As we've seen before, Woods uses second-person narration to establish her own opposition to those in power. Further, the song develops towards the lines, "my weaponry is my energy, I tenderly fill my enemies with white light" ("ZORA"). Here, beyond acknowledging Black women's activism as valid even in small or soft voices, Woods points towards the strategic value of these voices for the larger movement. These lines establish her participation in Collins' Black women's activism in which Black women's actions against issues that arise from larger institutional problems ought to be called activism as they are just as necessary as institutional critiques in Black women's "group survival."

Alongside her individual everyday activism, Woods, like Shange, participates in institutional community organizing efforts and movements to benefit her Chicago community and Black women more broadly. Woods' institutional activism stems from her experience as a student at Young Chicago Authors:

“My mentor made me say a poem over and over,” recalls Woods. “‘Stop! That’s not your voice. Start again.’ I was sobbing by the end, but it drilled into my head that my voice is important.” Now [2016], Woods is YCA’s associate artistic director, and she says the lesson propelled her - like thousands of other young Chicagoans, including Chance and Donnie Trumpet (now going by his real name, Nico Segal), who came through the program - into activism. “Part of our pedagogy is, you report on what’s going on in your neighborhood and your city,” says Woods. (Austen)

Now, Woods’ art expresses this need to find one’s voice - to realize one’s power, while also acknowledging and representing her community. The discussion quoted above with Ben Austen for *Billboard* is framed as an opportunity to “save Chicago.” Woods pushes beyond this discourse of saving Chicago by actively reaching out to those who are being misrepresented or who are not being represented at all. As discussed previously, her music video for “BALDWIN” interweaves interview footage from Chicago Public School students, thus using her platform to share voices of Black people who do not have large public platforms. In “GIOVANNI,” Woods shows her own mother and grandmother as well as other Black women in different careers. This, again, is grounding Woods in a community of Black women activists, and she chooses to elevate their stories. By elevating these stories, Woods argues for the authority of Black feminist activists working on an interpersonal stage.

Nitty Scott’s “Don’t Shoot!” takes the Black Lives Matter protest cry “Hands up, don’t shoot!” and uses it as the heartbeat of her lines calling out the ways in which Black people have been oppressed. The song begins with the repetition of “Don’t Shoot!” over police sirens, bringing to mind, for listeners, the contemporary response of the Black community to police brutality. Throughout the song, Scott’s lines call out slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary oppression and appropriation. She raps, “system built upon a cemetery, back when they tried to have the Blacks buried.” This song moves at a much faster tempo than those exploring Black women’s inner being. She angrily threatens those in power, “I burn the rebel flag down you can tell ‘em I did it,” and critiques those complicit, “they wanna be us never see us and never admit it” all at once. This integration of protest chants and direct institutional critiques articulates her support of the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement.

Scott’s activism has come in forms other than her music, too. She created “The Boombox Family,” an unfortunately short-lived collective of Black artists “focuse[d] on organic and message-driven hip-hop” (Scott qtd. in Jones). As a now independent artist, Scott has discussed

the ways in which she needed to be in control of her image and her brand as well as addressing the sexism and objectification she has experienced in the music industry (“Nitty Scott Elaborates...”). On social media, mainly on Instagram, Scott uses her platform to promote her art of course, but she also takes time to reflect on her mental health, her experiences travelling, and her thoughts on Black womanhood. She does this through captions on images sometimes of herself and sometimes of objects related to her recent experience, using Instagram as what Neil Shea calls “a powerful, unexpected, and mostly underutilized storytelling tool.” He notes that this platform “provides a creative space where voices and views that might otherwise be ignored, lost, or mangled during their brush with journalism can be shared, beautifully, with almost anyone” (Shea). Scott’s strategic use of the platform interrupts commodified images to get information out to her followers that might disrupt their ingrained white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies, and she does this with a style and in a space that is not recognized as one of activism and theorizing – that of the Instagram caption.

Scott’s use of Instagram supplements personal and spiritual reflection with more exposition-based posts about her experiences. In the aforementioned post from July of 2019, Scott shares her complicated experience visiting a plantation in the American South. The post includes images from the plantation of cotton, the plantation home, and the outdoor space. Her caption complicates the images she shares as she critiques the plantation visiting experiences. As quoted earlier, she writes, “after paying the admission fee to the white lady at the front (where exactly does all this money go? and was I really just charged for access to this education as a black person?), we proceed to walk the grounds & the big house with a guide who cheerfully shares fun facts & tea about the rich family who originally lived there, mostly glossing over the horrors that made it all possible” (@nittyscottmc). Scott’s experience on this plantation exposes the neglected Black history involved in slavery, and her commentary on the situation certainly theorizes the experience. Here, Scott uses innovative forms of expression to theorize her experiences from a viewpoint that she knows (as evident in her work) is underrepresented. Her reflections are a form of representation beyond her art.

In Scott’s Instagram captions, she also reckons with mental health, despair, and political oppression. She opens a caption from September of 2019 with “mother nature is on fire. babies are dying in ICE custody. no public space is safe from a mass shooting that we will ‘think & pray’ about when it happens again” (@nittyscottmc). At first, this reads as exclusively political,

but the GIF attached to the caption - a blunt and a cup of tea - along with the remainder of the caption take on a tone of personal reflection. She transitions:

i am tired. i am also an empath and a highly sensitive person, & lately, the collective anxiety coupled with my own set of personal issues has just been paralyzing... i do mad work to transform that despair into action & tools for evolution daily, but i can't help but feel like maybe my heart wouldn't be so heavy if i just self-preserved. (@nittyscottmc)

In this excerpt from her longer reflection Scott shares her inner conflict and thus connects with her audience while humanizing herself as a Black woman. This is a deeply personal reflection to share with over sixty thousand followers. Doing this is, in itself, one of those actions that maintains Black women's "group survival" as Black women. In that moment, Scott may not have been energized enough to participate in organizational disruptions to institutional oppressions, but she could connect to a community that is consistently dehumanized while also practicing her own self-care through reflection. Following Collins, I would argue that this, too, is a moment of Black women's activism.

These three Black woman artists demonstrate Black women's activism in a variety of forms from working with Black youth to sharing vulnerable reflections on Instagram. Their activism is deeply rooted in communities of other dedicated activists. For Shange, this was her work with experimental theater and her participation in The Third World Women's Collective, for Woods, the influences of women like Shange and her schooling at Young Chicago Authors, and for Scott, her Boombox Family and her community of Afro-Boricua women. This activism that is deeply rooted in communities can clearly look a variety of ways. Shange worked with young Black women to establish a sense of self-worth while being active in the Black Arts Movement. Woods worked for the very organization that supported her while also interacting with students whose voices often get lost in the Chicago Public School system. For Scott, this activism is innovative as it strategically makes use of her online following to foster introspection alongside political awareness. These are all necessary forms of resistance to white supremacist structures. To understand their potential, we have to be willing to read outside of what is generally represented as traditional "Theory" to understand how Black women are talking to each other about their forms of resistance.

CONCLUSION: BLACK WOMEN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE

Hope for potential change to the Black women's experience in the future has been a major focus of Black feminist theorizing through and beyond these categories of home, teaching, and activism. This hope is not delusion, rather it comes from a place of knowing that Black women are consistently active in challenging the institutions that control and demand our own oppression. As we theorize educational spaces, hooks reminds us that the classroom is a space for revolution, as we envision our bodies and minds as home, we are reminded that we can find sanctuary in ourselves, and as we engage in action against those systems that shape Black women's oppression, we simultaneously emphasize the value of coming together while highlighting our humanity and autonomy.

Among the other themes identified in this thesis, Black women have consistently maintained theories that emphasize hope. Patricia Hill Collins points to hope in "Toward a Politics of Empowerment" as she analyzes the different domains in which Black feminist thought can be empowering. In her introduction to *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks reflects on her teaching experiences and sets the stage for the following essays as "Hopeful and exuberant, they convey the pleasure and joy I experience teaching; these essays are celebratory!" (10). Cheryl Wall analyzes June Jordan's work for the hope it can give readers, "Despite the pain attendant to working through these crises, Jordan holds out the hope that the end of these civil wars might be something that looks like love" (225). Ultimately, each of these Black feminist theorists finds a way to remind Black women to be resilient because there is a goal that they are working toward in the empowerment and liberation of Black women.

To exemplify this liberating theorizing in popular culture, I have identified the ways in which Shange, Woods, and Scott create homes within their art in which Black women can theorize their individual self-images while contributing to a discourse of a collective Black women's standpoint. I then analyzed their creation of classroom spaces as they not only provide an education for their respective audiences, but also create images of innovative Black feminist classrooms in which Black students are central and their lived experience is prioritized. In the final sections, I articulate the different modes of Black feminist activism that are practiced and encouraged by each artist and recognize the significance of hope in Black feminist theorizing regardless of form. I take each of these steps to ultimately argue for an embrace of the innovative

theorizing literary and cultural critics ought to recognize when reading Black feminist texts. To follow Christian's argument, we need to adapt our analytical methods to fit these innovative (and ever-evolving) modes of theorizing and creating.

The theorizing that occurs in popular spaces expands the accessibility of tools of expression for self-definition, tools of critique for education, and tools of empowerment for activism. Ntozake Shange set the tone for contemporary artists like Nitty Scott and Jamila Woods to continue creating homes, educating audiences, and acting on behalf of Black woman theorists. In *for colored girls*, we see Shange theorizing Black women's humanity and complexity. Over 40 years after its original publication, the choreopoem has inspired Black women artists to continue to develop their own unique voices as part of a larger community of Black women. Woods has taken her inspiration to her art by highlighting Black ancestry and establishing a new base of theoretical inspiration in *Legacy!Legacy!*. She has linked her artistic career to activism by working with young Black students to encourage their creativity while also amplifying the voice of the Black community in Chicago in her music videos. Nitty Scott has taken on the role of social media activist by innovating in Instagram captions to express her own personal and political reflections while humanizing herself through vulnerability. She has used her background as an Afro-Boricua, queer, PTSD survivor to shed light on intersectional oppressions facing Black women. Their engagements with Black women's lived experience can empower their audiences of us Black women and girls to demand space to self-define, to take control of our own education, and to see ourselves as activists while we do as much of the work as we can.

As anecdotal evidence for the links between these themes and the values of these texts, I end with an analysis of my own experience at a Jamila Woods concert with Nitty Scott as the opener. In May of 2019 I was in a position much like that of Nitty Scott in her Instagram post. The negative aspects of our society were overwhelming, and I felt incapable of stepping up to take on the work that needed, and still needs to be done. Scott began the show by encouraging the women of color and queer people of color to move to the front and by demanding that any white folks in the audience make space for this particular group of people to enjoy the show. As she opened her set, the energy of that group of us nearly on the stage was immediately empowered and uplifted. To put it simply, we were able to enjoy ourselves, to feel at home without ignoring the state of the world around us. We were able to become a new community, to

meet each other and engage with each other as a community. Scott and Woods, and Shange's legacy, facilitated a space for our active group survival.

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