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Theatre Practice-as-Research in Staging Black Feminist (Re)Memorials in Pan-African Plays:
Vejigantes by Francisco Arriví and *The Purple Flower* by Marita Bonner

D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

I am interested in marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other. I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see is in every way related to what one can say. In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus arrest and fix, the image of that other.

- Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 2004, 2.

Introduction

What has long eluded theatre practitioners and theorists alike is the link between the racial and sexual other's image and word. Here, Peggy Phelan emphatically states that contemporary culture even finds ways to name, arrest and fix the other's image in place.¹ That the underrepresented other can never just *be* on a theatrical stage is tantamount to an uneasy aggression towards a perilous figure embodied as "other." From the moment she/he/it enters the stage, bound by dominant culture's ways of seeing, the other is suspect. The "other" can run but cannot hide – always exposed. Hunted to a genocidal extinction. Visible, yet invisible all at once. How then does theatre disrupt arrested representations of an underrepresented other? If representations are a combination of codes and signs in place of something or ideas, then who or

¹ Peggy Phelan, (*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

what controls these representations? Dominant culture's view of representations of the other is in the process of stereotyping, which includes composing negative images, pictures, or codes for individual or whole groups of people.² Consequently, stereotypes can only exist and thrive where there are gross inequalities that underrepresented others cannot effectively oppose.³

An empowering method is a cultural activist mode, a process of drawing on cultural images and words of underrepresented others, and to (re) present them in ways to counter and replace contemporary culture's manufactured stereotypes of the other. In using a cultural activist mode, it is imperative to reimagine new links between the image and word, and to disrupt, and even erase previous ones. As the Artistic Director of the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble, I curated and investigated racialized and gendered characters in selected Pan-African plays: *Vejigantes* (1958) by Francisco Arriví (1915-2007) and *The Purple Flower* (1928) by Marita Bonner (1898-1971).⁴ Pan-African plays reflect strong references and images indicative of the effects of the slave trade on African descent peoples, repatriations to Africa and/or African mindset, reparations for slavery, spiritual and/or philosophical foci on Africa. Pan-African plays adopt an African-centered language that unifies all peoples of African descent with core commonalities to the *Africanesque* – a longing for an idea of “Africa” felt throughout the African Diaspora - and in no way a claim to a monolithic Black culture.

My methodology for extracting the link between image and word towards the

² V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, (*Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*, 2nd Ed. Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 2010), 35.

³ Kratz, Corinne Ann. (*The Ones That Are Wanted: Communication and The Politics of Representation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 109.

⁴ Thanks to the cast and production teams in the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble 2017-2018 season, especially to students Sydney Sheets, Peter Gould, Taylor Bryant, Ginger Staniel, Karlee Szyperski who assisted in documentation and research with the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble. Thanks to all the performers listed in this paper who contributed their amazing talents in the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble productions.

Africanesque is theatre practice-as-research, which is a combined set of practice methods with theoretical frames, and in this case, directing/designing, theatre, Black feminism, and Pan-African aesthetics. Robin Nelson states that practice as research (PaR) “involves a research in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry.”⁵ Theatre practice-as-research in Pan-African theatre is the study of theory, praxis, and artistic dilemmas in the quest of investigating philosophical or research questions with the final outcome being the creative output and/or in the creative process itself as self-discovery, exposition, and sojourn into the physical and spiritual manifestation of African and African Diasporic life.

In past seasons’ theatre practice-as-research projects, I employed digital media methods to uncover and recover readings of racialized gender representations, and to culturally situate these readings in Pan-African aesthetics. Digital media refer to audio, video, and photo content, encoded for use on electronic devices. In both theatre productions, *Vejigantes* and *The Purple Flower* I used digital platforms with images with JPEG, film with MP4 and AVI, and audio files with WAV in cultural and political activist montages. With these digital files, I created digitized Black feminist (re) memorials that were past Black feminist moments in selected plays, restaged as memorials in embodied image and text.

Through a theatrical lens, I developed digitized Black feminist (re)memorials in selected Pan-African plays, and now argue that these (re) memorials resisted dominant culture’s naming and fixing their “othered” representations. Staging these plays revealed a matrix of visual and

⁵ Robin Nelson. “The What, When, Where and Why of ‘Practice as Research’.” (*Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistance*. Edited by Robin Nelson. New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.

performative language that required further analyses in practice-as-research methods, in which practice is the primary source of inquiry, and the process of generating new knowledge and semiotic solutions in staging Black feminist (re)memorials - the restaging of the past as present moments/happenings. First, I will provide a brief background on theatre practice-as-research genealogies, Pan-African plays, theorizing digitized media with Black bodies in performance, and then summarize selected plays to show how digital media and live performance expose racialized gender representations with examples of digitized Black feminist (re)memorials in film, image, projection design, and audio files.

Theatre Practice-as-Research - Disciplinary Genealogies

So often, many assume theory precludes practice. However, theatre practice-as-research is about putting practice into theory; that is, to valorize practice as the primary mode of research and theory-making. To this end, praxis is defined as putting theory into practice, but may well be practice into theory. Theatre practice-as-research (PaR) originated in the mid-1980s in Finland and the United Kingdom first in the visual arts and then to the performing arts, even though arts research and practice have a longer history in academia.⁶ PaR really gained traction in the 2000s when performance studies theorist, Baz Kershaw launched the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom.⁷ PARIP promotes practice as “mediated” meaning transferable, for example from text to stage, and from stage to audience. Theatre practice-as-

⁶ Shaun May. (*Rethinking Practice as Research and The Cognitive Turn*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

research processes may include live and mediatized as in recorded images in photography, film and video as mass communication in theatre with live and performing bodies.⁸

Since PARIP emerged in the early 2000, theatre practice-as-research has gained worldwide following with theatre practitioners and theorists in Australia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, China, Nordic countries, France, Francophone Canada, and in the United States at the University of California, Davis and University of Southern California with theatre practice-as-research graduate programs.⁹ My own research and scholarship are aligned with theatre practice-as-research models with combined practices as primary modes of inquiry at California State University, Sacramento, and previously at Kent State University. Performance as research (PAR) is distinguished from practice-as-research (PaR). Performance as research (PAR) utilizes performance studies model including ethnography and social anthropology, arts and experimental theatre (Riley and Hunter xv-xvi). Practice-as-research (PaR), on the other hand, involves arts practices such as creative writing, dance, theatre/performance, exhibitions, film as evidence of primary critical research inquiry.

My theatre practice-as-research includes combined practices in theatre production with emphasis on incorporating the digital media (film, image, sound, lighting) with live performance and live bodies. Digital media used in productions include lighting, sound, video and projections of video and images. All production elements are combined with digital media to create a visual, sensory, and auditory experience with Black performing bodies to get to the heart of what Phelan says as a “contemporary culture [finding] a way to name, and thus arrest and fix, the image of

⁸ (<http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/faq.htm#9>)

⁹ Shannon Rose Riley and Lynnette Hunter. “Introduction” (*Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: : Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*. Eds. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynnette Hunter. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xx.

that other.”¹⁰ For example, the lighting on costumes, skin, body interact with the sheer energy and movement in the theatrical experience. My focus is on digital media and Black performing bodies, specifically Black feminist representations, mediated and mediatized in my theatre practice-as-research to investigate and create Black feminist (re) memorials. Digital media provides a means to retelling narratives, contesting and resisting contemporary culture’s “naming” and “fixing” of the other.

Pan-Africanism and Theatre

Nowhere is it more urgent to recover Pan-African plays and the Black image than in the age-old archives where images and texts are stored. However, to take ownership of image, word, and representations requires uncovering the hidden and often silenced voices there. Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone state that “the archive – as concept, as resource, as location, as site of power relations, as signifier of historical and cultural division and ownership of information and knowledge – has in recent years been the subject of much debate, largely centered on questions of who creates the archive, for whom is it created and how is it used.”¹¹ When the under-represented other takes control of the implicit power structures in archives, she/he/it does so to destabilize dominant historical accounts to recover its cultural artefacts.

Pan-Africanism, which is an intellectual movement about the concerns and issues of African and African descent peoples, is in the role of recovering and uncovering cultural images and word in archives. Trinidadian barrister Henry Sylvester Williams (1869-1911) coined the term “Pan-African” in 1897 as call for unity among Africans and peoples of African-descent here and abroad around issues of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, nationhood. This was in response

¹⁰ Peggy Phelan, (*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 2004), 2.

¹¹ Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, “The Imperative of the Archive,” (*Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*. Edited by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 17-40

to the recent Benin Expedition of 1897 and the ongoing Scramble for Africa from 1881-1914, as well as the plight of African-descent people worldwide¹² By 1900, Williams organized the Pan-African Conference in London, inviting Black intellectuals, including artists, theatre practitioners, musicians, scholars, and professionals around the world, among them Black feminists Anna Julia Cooper and Anna H. Jones. It would then take several decades of organizing with Pan-African Congresses that led to African and Caribbean independence movements with Ghana gaining independence from Britain in 1957 for self-government, then Nigeria in 1960 and other European colonies in Africa and some Caribbean nations in the struggles for equality in all areas of life. Pan-African theatre therefore, embodies a global Black theatre aesthetic in its local, national, and international sense in the ways Black artists, activists, playwrights, practitioners have responded, resisted, recovered, and reclaimed the past, and in honoring memory and ancestors in the long struggles for liberation.

Pan-Africanism is a strategic role in recovering a global Black past in Black women's (re)memorials. In many African, Caribbean, Latin-American and African American plays, Pan-African theatre is a cultural and political vehicle, communal healing through memory and catharsis, and a ready memorial with codes and symbols in the *Africanesque*. Any study in directing and staging Pan-African theatres would include the staging of plays and performances with scholarly rigor, embodied practice, spatial and aural acuity, resonating with and African world view efforts to recover representations of the image and word of the Black "other," and especially Black women from the margins and wings to the center stage.

¹² Justin M. Johnston. "Henry Sylvester Williams" (1869-1914)," (*Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture. Vol.I, A-C*. Edited by Carole Boyce Davies. Santa Barbara, Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 985-987.

Digitized Black Women's Performativity/Performance

Judith Butler's "fluidity of identities" theorizes the divide between "performance" and "performativity."¹³ "Performance" is theorized as having choices and intentionality, and "performativity" is viewed as a reiteration of hegemony, status quo, stereotypes and caricatures.¹⁴ "Performativity" is derived from philosopher J.L. Austin's speech-act theory with language distinguished as constative and performative. Constative language is descriptive, for example, "the sky is blue."¹⁵ This descriptive language does not affect or alter anything that it describes. Performative language, on the other hand, causes something to happen or change its state, for example, "let there be light."¹⁶ Performative language may be seen as repetitive to maintain power, dominance, and subordination.

In the case of colonial performativity that maintains power as fixity, Homi Bhabha defines fixity as "a sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism" in dominant cultures.¹⁷ Bhabha explains that fixity is a mode of representation that repeats its domination by holding and fixing subjects "in place" in what Bhabha calls a "daemonic repetition."¹⁸ In this case, performativity applied to fixity is, therefore, a repetition of power in actions done to subdue and oppress. Performativity in dominant culture's naming and fixing is a process of fixity. Another process in performativity, according to Bhabha is stereotypes that are strategies of fixity and is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is

¹³ Judith Butler. (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 175.

¹⁴ Sarah E. Chinn. "Performative Identities: Identity Politics to Queer Theory." (*The Sage Handbook of Identities*. Ed. Margaret Wetherell and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2010), 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha. (*The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”¹⁹ Stereotypes are “composite images,” “pictures” or codes for how others see groups of people, and are used to “fix” certain identities “in place.”²⁰ I contend that performativity is not inherent to the othered, but a fabrication in the dominant culture’s repetition of power and dominance to control and contain.

In a digitized world, the image and word of the underrepresented other are embodied in both performativity and performance. According to Judith Hamera and D. Soyini Madison performativity is

inscribed on the body – performed through the body – to mark identities. In this view of performativity, gestures, posture, clothes, habits, and specific embodied acts are performed differently depending on gender, as well as race, class, sexuality, and so forth, of the individual. How the body moves about the world and its various mannerisms, styles, and gestures are inherited from one generation through space and time to another and demarcated with specific identity categories.²¹

Hamera and Madison suggest that performativity is the “mark” of identities through gestures and clothes (xviii). Although steeped in stereotypes, performativity can assist in theorizing racialized identities.²² Performativity is useful in showing how Black performers play with essentialist

¹⁹ Ibid., 94-95.

²⁰ V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan. (*Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*. 2nd Ed. Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 2010), 35.

²¹ D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera and D. Soyini Madison. “Introduction: Performance Studies at the Intersections.” (*The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), xi-xxv.

²² Ibid., xviii

labels, but are not essentialist labels and stereotypes themselves because stereotypes are derived from dominant narratives, and exist where there are inequalities.

However Hamera and Madison acknowledge a “subversive” performativity defined as “an internalized repetition of subversive ‘stylized acts’ inherited by contested identities.”²³ With “subversive performativity,” the so-called “other” may appear to reiterate stereotypes, but in fact is a “performance” in its deliberate nature to upset and defy a dominant view. The othered may perform a subversive performativity as a deliberate “act” as “self-stereotypes” to unsettle dominant cultural view of the other. Black bodies in performance are not stereotypes. To be clear, stereotypes as discussed earlier, is derived from dominant cultural position, and only exist when there are inequalities to control others’ representation.²⁴ But, performance is a deliberate and intentional break from the performative repetition in social justice issues, and in renewing Black representations in digital media. I use this deliberate performance as embodiment, and practices. In this way, I accept the range of performativity and performance in Black bodies and Black women’s representations.

Black women’s performativity inhabits everyday life in unconscious cultural acts with gestures and movements where historical trauma, psychic, familial, and aural memories live. In Black women’s performativity are no stereotypes. Black women’s performance, on the other hand, is a deliberate act of identity, in what is selected for display, shaped and honed by the transaction between performer and audience, and often didactic to undo the composite images set in stereotypes. Black women’s performance instructs, presents pictures, and the need to reveal acts of memorializing an embodied culture and its performativity to an audience/spectator. A

²³ Ibid., xix.

²⁴ Corinne Ann Kratz. (*The Ones That Are Wanted: Communication and The Politics of Representation* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 109.

digitized Black women's performativity/performance combined is always "subversive" and non-conformist in dominant and colonial cultures, exploding myths and resisting hegemonic naming and fixing of their images. Embodied in these underrepresented histories are silences, mishaps, and memories in the essence of Black women's performativity, and the means to perform in recovering Black identity in both plays.

Recovering the Black Body in Performance

This project becomes a means of recovering the Black body in performance - a Black body overrun by inescapable naming and fixing. As Phelan warns: "in framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus arrest and fix, the image of that other."²⁵ So inescapable is the other, in this case - the image of Black body, that it risks being undone, fixed, and stereotyped according to Phelan's formulations. From Frantz Fanon caught in the white gaze, "Look, a Negro, Maman, a Negro!,"²⁶ to Harvey Young's Black body as "souvenir" in racist rage trophy;²⁷ to Soyica Diggs Colbert's Black body as a "mutilated black body,"²⁸ and to Saidiya Hartman's notion of the black body as fetishized,²⁹ the urgency is clear to resist inhumanity and injustices in stereotypes. Racist and colonial gaze threatens Black bodies in the waves of white supremacy and white nationalism since the end of the Civil War and Emancipation in the United States of America.

²⁵ Peggy Phelan, (*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 2004), 2.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon. (*Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 1952), 93.

²⁷ Harvey Young. (*Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013),7.

²⁸ Soyica Diggs Colbert.. (*Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 4-5

²⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman. (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22

With the 2010s fraught with police brutality, the death of Trayvon Martin, and the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter activism in the United States of America and now worldwide, the Black body is always and forever under assault. The Black body has been theorized in three categories here as: 1) Blackness as a fluid identity - as viewed and embodied by the Black self, 2) the Black body as immutable - viewed by dominant culture as unchanged and unchanging; and 3) the Black body as part of a wider Pan-African culture as an Africanesque performance. In terms of Blackness as a fluid identity, E. Patrick Johnson posits that “the fact of blackness is not always self-constituting ...Blackness, too, is slippery - ever beyond the reach of one’s grasp. Once you think you have a hold on it, it transforms into something else and travels in another direction.”³⁰ Johnson theorizes blackness as an identity - fluid, not fixed. Consequently, he resists “racist constructions of blackness, for example, [that] associate it with denigration, impurity, nature and the body.”³¹ Johnson theorizes that “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and the expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black’ culture.”³² This idea of Black performance definitely captures the intersectional categories of Black queer identities of being Black, male, trans, or American. As an identity, Blackness has its specificities in Black cultures and peoples; for example, Afro-Puerto Ricans African Americans or African or African from the continent - all, although Black, are complexed identities.

However, no matter how one chooses to express a Black identity with all its complexities and fluidity, stereotyping of blackness still lurks. Fanon describes the experience of being identified as a “Negro” by a white child in Paris. “‘Look, a Negro, *Maman*, a Negro!’ ... My body

³⁰ E. Patrick Johnson. (*Appropriating Blackness: Performance and The Politics of Authenticity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

was returned to me spread-eagled. Disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day.³³ Fanon describes the inhumanity of being named and fixed as "Negro," and in an out-of-body experience, death, and dismemberment of Black body from the self. For other scholars, especially in theorizing enslaved Black bodies and performance, and in the wake of the 2010s extrajudicial killings of unarmed Black people in the so-called "post race" era of 2010s, the Black body is mutilated and dismembered, and pre-requisite in Blackness, the Black body and performance.

As Hartman puts it, performance and Blackness are spectacles of torturous Black bodies from slavery to present-day abuses:

The affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectacularization of black pain and racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering and to an interested misreading of the interdependence of labor and song among the enslaved. The constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other's enjoyment went hand in hand.³⁴

Hartman observes that performance and blackness are heightened due to Black pain perceived as pleasure and spectacle, even unto the mutilation of Black bodies - fetishized and dehumanized.³⁵

Even Harvey Young theorizes the permanence of Black bodies embodying long-held defeatist stereotypes. He contends that "the mystery of blackness, which manages to become a fact through repeated deployment across a range of bodies, encourages the (mis)identification of

³³ Fanon, Frantz. (*Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 1952), 93-94.

³⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman. (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

individuated bodies (*a body*) as the black body.”³⁶ Young further explains the Black body, in examples of lynching victims to be held as “souvenirs” and fetishes by white mobs, to the subsequent racial profiling and surveillance of Black people in all areas of life.³⁷ Even with the past and present, Young speaks of the permanence of race and the Black body through generational lineage: “my body is the futued body of my great-great-grandmother, my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. It is the future manifestation of my ancestors’ bodies viewed from a past perspective in which the future past, the futued, is the then-present that is now.”³⁸ The Black body throughout time is an embattled space. So too, Colbert argues that the Black body ss mutilated and dismembered to illustrate the racist rage and the perils of Blackness.³⁹ In theorizing the Black female body, Colbert uses various sources from Beyonce’s performance, Suzan-Lori Parks’s depictions of Saartjie Baartman in *Venus*, and Coco Fusco’s and Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s “The Couple in the Cage.” Colbert argues that these performances undermine US cultural assumptions that the white maleness is normal and that Black femaleness is excessive and sexualized in western hierarchies.⁴⁰

Even though I agree with dire straits and urgency of the Black body, especially in this era, I contend that unless challenged, the Black body remains fatalistic, destined to be destroyed in maniacal repetition of violence. These readings of black bodies, embodiment, and performance are well-documented and theorized as unchanged to explain the performance of power meted out upon Black bodies, not to be confused with self-determination, or even with the

³⁶ Harvey Young. (*Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁹ Soyica Diggs Colbert.. (*Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95..

capacity for Black resiliency. This is necessary work in explaining Black body in performance as immutable and torturous to jar complacency in activism and in contemporary culture, to “stay woke” against the racial violence that is, after all, in the bodily, emotional, mental, and spiritual realms.

Although the Black body in performance may be represented as fatal, fetishized, and dismembered, depending on the work at hand, I have chosen a Pan-Africanist cultural activist model in theatrical performance to prove the resiliency of Black people in their survival, and in recovering the dismembered Black body. In doing so, I claim an African-centered memory that always resists dominant culture’s fatalism of Black bodies since time immemorial. Instead of dismemberment and mutilation of Black bodies and minds, I have chosen to memorialize Black women characters in theatrical performances as Black feminist (re)memorials that are about piecing together the Black body in the theatrical event with digital media (film and image, lighting and sound) to retell the stories so often that does not get told. (Re)memorials are about *(re)memberments* as only Black artists can do, and should do to resist the mutilated image of Black bodies of this era, but to recount the resiliency of Black people as cultural activists in theatre productions. In doing this activist work in representations, I enact a vision of resistance in escaping dominant culture’s persistence in “naming” and “fixing” of representations of the other, and in recovering the embattled Black body in contemporary society, one representation at a time.

Digital Media, Blackness, and The Black Body

Digital media are tools of power among dominant cultures with access to new technologies, much to the exclusion of representations of the other. In recovering representations

of Black bodies in performance, digital media are made accessible to a wide cross section of people of color, and their various audiences. Other leading scholars addressing digital media, Black feminism and Black bodies in various ways to tease out issues of race, gender, and sexuality include Janell Hobson and Grant Bollner who are concerned about access to digital media and their potential to give voice to “othered” groups of people in various genres, and digital media’s potential in social change.⁴¹ Hobson questions whether a social revolution can even be digitized.⁴² She is critical of the emergence of digital media as creating a “digital divide” that empowers those with access to new technologies and those without access to digital media.⁴³ Therefore, those without access to digital technologies are rendered silent.. Although the “digital divide” certainly exists, a growing number of Black artists and practitioners have accessed digital media in theatre practice with new ways to tell stories and in new representations. Cell phones held in Black hands, including dash and body cams, many of whom have captured films of police brutality leading to deaths of Black men and women from Trayvon Martin to Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland, are real testaments to potential digital media stories for memorials yet untold.

Digital media is therefore a site of contestation and a place to claim and challenge political power, and to make bold interventions into power. Digital media theatrical performance empowers Black bodies and representations in the theatrical realm. Coupled with culture, digital media become culture agents, vehicles for Black storytelling. For example, Grant Bollner argues that “practices in photography and cinema are a combination of the *material, physical qualities of media* ... and the *beliefs* that inform the way is employed (typically, racist beliefs that position white bodies are more significant than black ones, where, consequentially, the medium obscures

⁴¹ Janelle Hobson. (*Body as Evidence: Mediating Race, Globalizing Gender*, New York: Suny Press, 2012), 95; Grant Bollner. (*Theorizing Digital Cultures*. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc. 2018), 12.

⁴² Hobson op. cit., 116.

⁴³ Ibid., 116

black bodies through the use of lighting in photography and film)”⁴⁴ In this way, Bollner calls out the implicit biases in digital media in valorizing dominant cultures, in this case, white bodies as more significant.

In Stuart Hall’s theories on encoding/decoding, he explains that encoding is the production of coded meanings prepared for audience or spectators receiving these codes. Hall illustrates how the receiver decodes meanings by understanding and reinterpreting a coded message.⁴⁵ When this principle is applied to theatre, practitioners “encode” with images, verbal cues, body languages, and even with digital media as I am proposing. Directors can encode, based on what s/he and they believe a particular audience will understand; but more than that, directors can communicate something mutually understood. This could be stereotypes, or some commonly held or acceptable view. Decoding, on the other hand, is in the eyes of the audience. If the audience receives encoded messages, as Hall states in the same way the encoder intends, then this constitutes a “successful” communication. However, if the audiences “doesn’t get it,”and does not get the message of the encoder, then a distortion occurs, and it fails to communicate.

In theatrical performance, theatre practitioners can choose to jar and distort the meanings, to intentionally upset and create havoc in dominant culture representations, just as long as this act is intentional in theatre praxis. Although I agree with Hall’s basic premise of encoding/decoding, in theatrical performance, I insist that the so-called “othered” must be able to blast this formulation so that the decoding process among audiences should be chaotic to break the inescapable cycle of naming and fixing othered bodies in representations. Until the full

⁴⁴ Grant Bollner. (*Theorizing Digital Cultures*. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc. 2018), 12.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall. “Encoding/Decoding.” (*Culture, Media, Language*. Eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis. New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 117.

control of the images are transferred from the dominant culture to the othered, the cycle of stereotypes in representations is likely to promulgate. In the examples below for *Vejigantes* by Francisco Arrivi and *The Purple Flower* by Marita Bonner, I have sought to digitize Black feminist (re)memorials in theatrical performances, encoding to recover the Black body with the characters in these Pan-African plays.

***Vejigantes* and Three Generations of Afro-Puerto Rican Women**

Digitized Black women's performativity/performance inquiry lies with how the confluence of race, gender, and sexual violence in dramatic representations affect the everyday lives of Black women characters, specifically African Caribbean (Afro-Puerto Rican) and African American women in selected plays, and in the *Africanesque* - cathartic notions about "Africa" in Black feminist thought - embedded in these plays. These examples of early and mid-twentieth century plays grapple with issues of power, race, gender, xenophobia, and homophobia in nuanced ways that variously haunt early twenty-first century understanding, and with overarching questions about a philosophical Africa writ large.

As a director, and especially as a designer, using digital media were seamless processes in creating multiple layers of meaning, creating aural and spatial relationships, and in being didactic in the meanings to communicate racial and sexual otherness through the philosophical musings of time and space on stage. I employed digital media in performance as socio-political and techno-transactions within Black cultures as mass consumers of digital technologies in shaping and re-branding Black life in the global sphere. In selected *Vejigantes* scenes, Black women's performativity/performance held the potential to control its representations. As Philip Auslander argues, "live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live

event itself is the product of media technologies.”⁴⁶ The use of technologies in live performance was always typical in theatre involving innovative practice since the emergence of Ancient Greek theatre with innovative effects. Theatre practitioners continue to push the limits of theatre with computer technologies, internet, and social media; and as Steve Dixon says of the computer screen and the Web is “the largest theatre in the world, offering everyone fifteen megabytes of fame.”⁴⁷

For my digital media projects, I have used AVI and WAV for videos and audio files; JPEG for images; and manipulated PowerPoints to create MP3 files. I have experimented with these files with live performance to create Black feminist (re) memorials in key historical moments/issues underrepresented in Black women’s performativity/performance and present happenings. I emphasized references about “Africa” in a dreamscape of new counter representations. The play *Vejigantes* by Francisco Arriví, for example, is set in 1958 in Loiza (“Little Africa”) Puerto Rico. Here in “Little Africa,” the play illustrates the racialized gender oppressions experienced by three generations of Puerto Rican women locked in a tragic *Mulata* trope in the play, including a Black grandmother Mama Toña, her daughter, Marita who “passes” for white, but covers her tightly curled hair with a turban to hide any hint of Blackness.

Marta’s daughter, Clarita clearly passes for white, but has lived with hiding her African ancestry. The story unfolds with Marta’s anxiety to get her daughter Clarita quickly married to the white American from Alabama, Bill, so he could take Clarita away from what Marta says is this “nigger-ridden set up” in Puerto Rico to the United States.⁴⁸ Clarita must make the choice to

⁴⁶ Philip Auslander, “Live Performance in a Mediatized Culture.” (*Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 24.

⁴⁷ Steve Dixon, “Researching Digital Performance: Virtual Practices,” (*Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*. Edited by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 41-62.

⁴⁸ Francisco Arriví, “Masquerade.” (*A Time and A Season: Eight Caribbean Plays*. Translated by

expose the family's secret of hiding her Black grandmother, her mother's hair under a turban, or to continue hiding her African ancestry, or to confront Bill's racism and to accept her African ancestry. The play begins forty-five years in the past at the *Vejigantes* masquerade, the Feast of Santiago, or Feast to St. Thomas, held in July in Loiza ("Little Africa") in Puerto Rico.

Staging *Vejigantes* with practice-as-research was a process of generating new knowledge with Black feminist (re)memorials - the restaging of the past as present moments/happenings. I used digital media with projections of *Vejigantes* masks shape shifting and morphing with the audio recordings of disembodied voices taunting Toña in the opening scenes with the *Vejigantes* masquerade and the sexual assault during the carnival. Benedicto, a rich white Spanish man pursues and seduces a young Toña in the masquerade. Instead, he rapes Toña, overpowered in the assault, and in race and gender. I developed audio files for carnival maskers during the live performance, with voices taunting Toña during and after Benedicto assault on her. This exchange below revealed the effects of racialized gender representations during the chase and rape of Toña by Benedicto using digital media in audio recording to slow speed, and projections with morphing *Vejigantes* masks, prepared by student Peter Gould for the production. [Figure 1](#) is an MP3 file with the voices used for the production, on a slow speed with echoes with First Mask performed by Alex Burton, and with Second Mask performed by Jessica Bryant. [Figure 2](#) is an MP4 file showing the slow morphing of *Vejigantes* masks.

Excerpt from *Vejigantes*:

First Mask: ... He can't catch her

Second Mask: He'll catch her

First Mask: He'll lose her in the bush.

Errol Hill. *Mona*: University of the West Indies Press, 1976),146.

Second Mask: He'll catch her.

First Mask: ... Why do you think he is going to catch her?

Second Mask: Because Toña wants to be caught.

First Mask: Why do you think Toña wants to be caught?

Second Mask: Because she likes the Spaniard

...

Second Mask: She has the devil in her today and he'll catch her in the bushes

First Mask: ... Let me cover my ears.

Second Mask: Those Spaniards always take off the prettiest dark girl.

First Mask: ... What did you say?

Second Mask: The Spaniards always carry off the prettiest brown girls.

First Mask: What are you worrying about? We all know that the brown girls love the Spaniards. Let's go and dance.⁴⁹

The scene occurs during the sexual assault as Benedicto overpowers the young Toña. This staging of Black feminist (re) memorial with digital media exposes the layers of sexual assault that Toña had no other recourse and defense because no one would believe that she was raped by Benedicto. After the assault, Benedicto says to Toña as she weeps:

You shouldn't let what happened worry you like this. How many girls in the village started out this way? And today are selling themselves on the streets of San Juan. (Toña lets herself drop to the ground and weeps.) There is a little wooden house behind my shop. You could have it for as long as you want. (Toña

⁴⁹ Francisco Arriví, "Masquerade." (*A Time and A Season: Eight Caribbean Plays*. Translated by Errol Hill. Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 1976), 106.

shakes her head.) Be calm. It's just for the time being. Soon I shall be able to look after you in a better way.⁵⁰

The young Toña becomes pregnant from this rape. Her daughter, Marta is raised by her white Spanish father, Benedicto, in his house while Toña is kept as a secret mistress at night in the wooden shack behind his house, and works as his maid in the day. Marta, who is light-skinned and passes for white, grows up with the shame about her mother's blackness and rape. She hides her tightly curled hair under a turban to pass for white, all the while shunning her own Black mother. Marta grows up to marry a white Spanish man, and they have a child, Clarita, who passes for white with her hair and light skin. The tragic mulata trope, a literary device from American 19th century novels, usually ends with the *La Mulata* or *Mulatress* committing suicide after her lover discovers that she is Black. In *Vejigantes*, Arriví changes the Mulata troupe's tragic end of non-acceptance to Clarita embracing her African heritage.

Vejigantes masquerades derive from Medieval Spain when Christians battled Black Muslim Moors to claim Spain for Christians. Spanish folklore claimed that St. Thomas appeared in battle to defeat the Moors. Since then in Spain, commemorations of this battle represented Black Moors as multiple horned devils demon with bat-like winged costumes, dancing through the streets, scaring spectators along the way to repent of their sins. When Spain colonized Puerto Rico and enslaved Africans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Spanish colonists continued the *Vejigantes* masquerades in Puerto Rico. Spanish colonists converted enslaved Africans to Catholicism, and continued with their version of *Vejigantes* combined with African and Taino masking traditions. For enslaved Africans, *Vejigantes* became a subversive symbol for the *Africanesque* in Puerto Rico

⁵⁰ Ibid.,109.

Francisco “Paco” Arriví (1915 – 2007) was a writer, poet, and playwright known as "The Father of the Puerto Rican Theater." Arriví received a Rockefeller scholarship in 1949 to pursue a master's degree in Radio and Theater from Columbia University in New York, USA. In 1951, Arriví wrote, the first television program transmitted in Puerto Rico called *Ayer y Hoy* (Yesterday and Today). Over the next two years, he wrote the script for *El Niño Dios* (*The Child God*) and *Luis Muñoz Rivera*. By 1958, Arriví presented *Vejigantes* in the First Festival of Puerto Rican Theater, and received an award from the Institute of Literature. Representations of the image and text of the “other” are never more apt when unraveling the knot of racialized gender and sexual assault. Clarita who now carries two generations of shame meets white American Bill from Alabama. Bill is an insurance salesperson at Clarita’s workplace. One of her duties in the personnel department is to show Bill around Puerto Rico. The mother, Marta, explains to Clarita her shame in her skin color, and wanting to “free” her daughter, Clarita from the “curse of Africa.” Marta states,

Before I married your father, I was thinking of you. I made love to him for your sake. I wanted a daughter whiter than myself. I wanted to free you from the curse of Africa, which I have to hide under this turban...I want to save you from the insults that deform the soul. From fears that wreck all will-power. From bitterness that strangles the heart. Save you. Save you. Hand you over free into the kingdom of the white people. ⁵¹

In Marta’s world the “curse of Africa” is real when trying to hide her hair under the turban and her African ancestry. Marta’s mother, Mama Toña restores the *Africanesque* in her appreciation

⁵¹ Francisco Arriví, “Masquerade.” (*A Time and A Season: Eight Caribbean Plays*. Translated by Errol Hill. Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 1976), 129-130.

of an African ancestry by the end of the play. In this digitized Black feminist (re) memorial moment, actors faced the audience as in a series of histrionic and didactic monologues in the play script with a series projected images and texts.

Another digital media method I used in production was Impromptu Narratives on Film (I.N.F.) that involved cast members' impromptu narratives delivered extemporaneously and directly to the camera on a theme or issue in the play or performance. The main characters, Mama Toña (Jessica Bryant), Benedicto (Ricky Ortega), Clarita (Rafaela Clerles), Marta (Bridget Martinez) recorded impromptu monologues on their cell phones about their characters and in character about issues in the play. This was a great exercise in being self-reflexive and in developing their characters during the rehearsal process. Even though these films were exercises for the actors, I incorporated them at the beginning and end of scenes, and during the intermission on loops in the final production. [Figure 3](#) is an MOV file showing the character, Benedicto in his impromptu narrative on film, performed by Ricky Ortega. [Figure 4](#) is an MOV file showing the character, Clarita in her impromptu narrative on film, performed by Bridget Martinez.

In a flashback, Bill and Clarita go on a date to Luquillo Beach. Bill is disturbed by the “mixing” of races on the beach with blacks, whites, and brown people together, unlike the segregation in the United States during the period in the play. Bill is unaware that Clarita has African ancestry:

Clarita: ...What displeases the American god?

Bill: I don't like seeing so many white people going around with niggers. (Clarita stops smiling and looks toward the direction where noise is coming from.) That sort of thing spoils the charm. ...

Bill: Most American tourists don't like that sort of thing.

Clarita: (Looking at him with restrained force) I'm sorry, Bill. In that case Luquillo beach is lost for the tourists of that kind. It has been used by the people of Puerto Rico for years. They come here and enjoy it and nobody is going to drive them off it. When they run on its sands and refresh their bodies in its water, they forget about race.⁵²

By the end of the play, Clarita tells Bill that her grandmother, Mama Toña is Black. With racial disgust for the three women, Bill physically fights Clarita and her mother, Marta. Mama Toña enters, and finally stands up to Bill, chases him out of their home to restore and reclaim a proud African heritage as central in the home. In that moment, Mama Toña confronts the memory of her attacker and keeper, Benedicto, and the pain of her sexual assault some forty-five years earlier, and the curse of the *Mulata* troupe is broken. In an *Africanesque* moment, Clarita now accepts her African heritage as part of Puerto Rican culture. I staged the finale as a "marriage" between Clarita and Puerto Rico instead of to the American Southerner, Bill. Clarita's costume transformed into a white wedding gown, and orange flamboyant flowers, typical on the beaches in Loiza, in her hair and as a wedding bouquet.

In the background were projections in images and film of orange flamboyant flowers falling on the screens, superimposed on the actors and with slow bomba music. Clarita walked through the auditorium as if in a wedding march; Mama Tona was lost in dancing to the slow bomba music; and Marta stood with her back to the audience, slowly unwrapping her turban to show her hair. In this way, Arriví subverts the tragic *Mulata* trope for three generations of

⁵² Ibid., 132.

Afro-Puerto Rican women to confront the racism and sexual assault that kept them locked and hidden. Through staging with digital media, performance art, and Black embodiment, I revealed how in moments of incredible pain and loss, the three generations of Puerto Rican women in *Vejigantes* could seize empowerment over the masks of sexual violence, racism, and sexism that had shamed their bodies and silenced their voices. Digitized Black feminist (re) memorials recovered the lost history in Black Puerto Rican culture.



[Figure 5](#) – Act Three, *Vejigantes* by Francisco Arriví, Directed by D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson. Characters Mama Tona (Jessica Bryant) left, and Marta (Rafaela Clerles) to the right. Photo by Sydney Sheets.

The Purple Flower and White Supremacy

The Purple Flower (1928) by Marita O. Bonner is the first surrealist play written by an

African American woman and is acclaimed as Bonner's finest masterpiece. As a playful and satirical protest against white supremacy, *The Purple Flower*, is a one-act play first published in the N.A.A.C.P. *Crisis* Magazine in 1928, consisting of two sets of characters: "White Devils" and "Us's." Through heightened surrealism and political performance, the play relays a spiral of racial tensions in the United States in the 1920s that applies to contemporary society even now, and to any oppressed peoples around the world. Although Bonner never produced *The Purple Flower* during her lifetime, perhaps because of its "bold" racial representations, the *Crisis* Magazine awarded Bonner's play its first prize in its literary competition.

Bonner was a Harvard University graduate, a novelist, poet, and playwright. Her groundbreaking essay "On Being Young – A Woman – and Colored" was published in the *Crisis* in 1925; and was one of the earliest articulations of Black feminist thought in the twentieth century. Bonner's plays *The Potmaker* (1927), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit: An Illusion* (1929) were some of the most significant African American plays that made her an important figure in African American theatre.⁵³ *The Purple Flower* was one of the earlier charges to social and political action in an African American plays written in a surrealist style, a popular artistic movement of the period, of which she was influenced. In the play, the "White Devils" live on the hill where the purple flower grows. The "Us's" live in the valley below, working and toiling for the "White Devils," and are treated as outsiders. Toiling for the "White Devils" is reminiscent of slavery and the slave trade. The "Us's" spend their time figuring out how to get up the hill, and the "White Devils" keep them away. The "Us's" decide to have a meeting to discuss how to get up the hill but the character, "Average" complains that talking will not accomplish anything.

⁵³James V. Hatch and Ted Shine. "The Purple Flower, 1928: Marita Odette (Occomy) Bonner (1898-1971)." (*Black Theatre USA: Revised and Expanded Edition – The Early Period, 1847-1938*. Edited by James V. Hatch and Ted Shine. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney: The Free Press, 1996), 212.

Characters, “Sweet” and “Finest Blood” volunteer to talk at the meeting. An “Old Us” beats on a drum while the other “Us's” stand up and begin to dance. They can see the purple flower at the top of the hill. The “Young Us's” say that they have been told all of their lives to work hard, but it has gotten them nowhere.

A “Young Man” tosses books to the ground saying that even books cannot tell them how to overcome the “White Devils” wrote books. “Sweet” comes running out of the bushes and says that a “White Devil” hiding there pinched her. A “Newcomer” joins the group, dropping two bags of gold on the ground. He claims that this money does nothing for him while the “White Devils” do not allow him to get anywhere with it. In the end, the “Old Man” asks for an iron pot and begins calling upon the “Old Us's” and their ancestors. Ten million “Us's” respond and asks for a handful of dust, books, and gold which he receives and throws into the pot. Finally, he asks for blood, and the “Us's” are silent. “Finest Blood” steps forward to offer his blood, and then “Cornerstone” offers hers. The “Old Man” explains that by mixing these things together, God will shape a new man. “Finest Blood” is given the task of going up the hill to fight the “White Devils.” The final stage direction reads "Let the curtain close leaving all the Us's, the White Devils, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening. Is it time?"⁵⁴

In the spring production of *The Purple Flower*, I investigated Bonner’s symbolism in her surrealist approach against white supremacy and its effects with racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. I had an all-female cast of five women who played multiple roles to devise from the play, including Elizabeth Smith, Liz Schmidt, Kimberley Debham, Melina Collins, Kennedy Combs, Kendra Dempster-Walsh. I used the stage directions in the play as narration in this short one-act play. I directed *The Purple Flower* using vignettes from the play with the “White Devils”

⁵⁴ Ibid., 212.

living on the hill where the purple flower grows, and with the “White Devils” oppressing the “Us’s” in the valley, who work and toil for the White Devils. I used this symbolism for “White Devils” oppression on the “Us’s” with an experimental piece relevant in today’s issues and concerns affecting women of color, all women, and allies using vignettes from the plays.

I staged a Black feminist (re)memorial by allowing each cast member to reflect on the themes and symbolism in the play, and then had them write and memorize their personal statements on race, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Standing downstage facing the audience, the cast wore black t-shirts with bold writing – “Fuck White Supremacy” in white with black pants, each cast member said their statements individually and then together in a round. By providing the cast some space for personal statements, they brought to life some of the multiple voiced oppressions from Bonner’s play, and brought the concerns from the past in present focus.



[Figure 6](#) - Cast and Director for *The Purple Flower* by Marita Bonner, from left: Elizabeth “Liz” Schmidt, Kimberly Debbam, D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson (Director), Melina Collins, Kendra Dempster-Walsh, and Kennedy Combs (seated). Photo by Taylor Bryant.

As a performance art piece, I focused on staging the surrealism in *The Purple Flower* by framing the piece as a dream-like state and by filming one of the cast members, Melina Collins, sleeping, and tossing and turning on a couch in [Figure 7](#) on a AVI file. Then I recorded and played part of the lines in from the character “Sweet” who screamed at seeing a “White Devil” lurking in the bushes, “There’s a white devil sitting in the bushes in the dark over there! There’s a white devil in the bushes in the dark over there! And when I walked by – he pinched me!”⁵⁵ [Figure 8](#) is a WAV file with a quick-speed voice-over, “There a white devil in the bushes in the dark over there,” played on a loop during the video, pre- and post-show. By the end of the play, the actor woke up as if from the nightmare of racial, sexual and gender oppression in the play.

With the cyclical action and repetition, I achieved the main themes of struggle with the “Us’s” laboring in the valley for the White devils; and setting up the tension against white supremacy in the play. I used audio recordings from Bonner’s essay *On Being Young - a Woman - and Colored*, and with vignettes from the play in mime, created layers of meaning between the image and word in the performance. Below is an excerpt from Bonner’s essay, recorded and played over scenes. In a Black feminist (re)memorial, Bonner’s words echoed in space and time across the decades speaking to current issues in Black women’s lives and in performativity/performance.

But – “In Heaven’s name, do not grow bitter. Be bigger than they are” – exhort white friends who have never had to draw breath in a Jim Crow train. Who have never had petty putrid insult dragged over them – drawing blood like pebbled sand on you body where the skin is tenderest. On you body where the skin is

⁵⁵ Ibid., 212.

thinnest and tenderest. You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly. But you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder even if you can manage a smile around your eyes – without getting steely and brittle and losing the softness that makes you a woman.⁵⁶

A collage projection of gifs with talking lips, the continent of Africa, and nerve endings in a projection display to abstract jazz sounds, worked as the soundscape and backdrop to the action of the play. In many ways, the projections performed some of the key moments for mimes, voice overs, and provided space and time for audience to experience the psychic and spatial dimensions of racialized histories.



[Figure 9.](#) Collage projections, *The Purple Flower*, designed by D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson

⁵⁶ Marita Bonner, "On Being Young—A Woman—And Colored," *The Crisis*, (1925), 246.

Suspended above the stage were menacing white carnival devils masks with red horns, glowing red, green and blue lights in the eyes. However, Liz Schmidt wore a white devil mask and carried extended hands to appear as a walking puppet. This costume piece was the main “White Devil” of all the devil masks, representing white supremacy. The “White Devil” stayed by the hill, guarding the a purple flower and moved around the stage keeping the “Us’s” in place. In using live, mediatized performances, and carnival puppet arts, the stage was playful, haunting, and thought-provoking for the play to come alive in the twenty first century, and for everyone to consider how white supremacy in the play had impacted the all-female cast members in a political and activist performance.



[Figure 10.](#) Film Still from *The Purple Flower* showing collage projections, showing the White Devil, played by Elizabeth “Liz” Schmidt.

In one scene/vignette, the character, “Old Man” played by Kendra Dempster-Walsh, prepares the “Finest Blood,” performed by Kennedy Combs to coax the “White Devil” out of the bushes so he

could kill him. With the all-female cast, “Finest Blood” becomes the hero for fighting the “White Devil” in the finale. “Old Man” coaches “Finest Blood” in how to prepare for the fight and sacrifice:

An Old Us will never tell you to play White Devil's games! No! Do not kill him in the dark. Get him out of the bushes and say to him: "White Devil, God is using me for His instrument. You think that it is I who play on this pipe! You think that it is I who play upon this pipe so that you cannot stay in your bushes. So that you must come out of your bushes. But it is not I who play. It is not I, it is God who plays through me -- to you. Will you hear what He says? Will you hear? He says it is almost day, White Devil. The night is far gone. A New Man must be born for the New Day. Blood is needed for birth. Blood is needed for the birth. Come out, White Devil. It may be your blood -- it may be mine -- but blood must be taken during the night to be given at the birth. It may be my blood -- it may be your blood -- but everything has been given. The Us toiled to give dust for the body, books to guide the body, gold to clothe the body. Now they need blood for birth so the New Man can live. You have taken blood. You must give blood. Come out! Give it." And then fight him!⁵⁷

The play’s symbolism is on defeating white supremacy, by playing within its rules before striking and attack. In staging a Black feminist (re) memorial of this historic piece, cast members were able to stage a fight scene with the White Devil, prepared personal statements on Black feminisms and defeated white supremacy in its wake, albeit in the playfulness of the scene. As

⁵⁷ James V. Hatch and Ted Shine. “The Purple Flower, 1928: Marita Odette (Ocoomy) Bonner (1898-1971).” (*Black Theatre USA: Revised and Expanded Edition – The Early Period, 1847-1938*. Edited by James V. Hatch and Ted Shine. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney: The Free Press, 1996), 212.

the scene ends, the film with the actor Melina Collins, waking up from a nightmare to the repetition in audio with “There’s a White Devil in the bushes in the dark over there! There’s a White Devil in the bushes over in the dark.”⁵⁸

Consequently, my research questions with theatre practice as research investigated the impact of live and mediatized performance when staging issues around race, gender, and cultural activism. Phelan states that performance can never be recorded, leading some critics to assume that Phelan is opposed to mediatized formats with live performance (148).⁵⁹ However, theatre with audio visual techniques within live performance may well be theatre, creating the liveness in the moment of a staged event with spectators or audience. What counts is active spectatorship to establish liveness. Live performance is only live if there are spectators/audience as voyeurs. Liveness does not even need a human being or living creature as “actor” for the event to be performance. Live performance can be only mediatized with digital media techniques, or combined with other elements such as a live performer. Liveness is transactional among the performer and active spectator where meanings are created and shared.

To facilitate the transaction between performer and active spectator, image, and word, I used theatre practice as research with a combined set of practices in digital media, installation, live and mediatized performance, embodiment, Caribbean masquerade, and performance art, to unearth and decode racialized gender stereotypes in the staged performances. I developed and staged Black feminist (re) memorials that are acts of restaging past actions/injustices; and creating spaces for justice to be enacted as present happenings on stage. Joseph Roach defines memory as operating as “an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that is itself, for

⁵⁸ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁹ Peggy Phelan, (*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 148.

better or worse, a work of art.”⁶⁰ As works of art, Black feminist (re) memorials oscillated between the past and present acts of restorative justice; and provided ways for Black female characters to illustrate a journey for audiences to be fully engaged in the action. In addition, as designer/director, I elaborated on Stuart Hall’s theories on representation, stereotypes, and audience reception through developing a combined set of practices in digital media, installation, live and mediatized performance, embodiment, Caribbean masquerade, and performance art, to unearth and decode racialized gender stereotypes in the staged performances. In theatre production, Hall’s reception theory, including encoding/decoding, involved visual and linguistic signs that govern how “texts” such as works of art, media, and theatre could be received and interpreted by audiences.

Conclusion: Pan-African Plays - *Vejigantes* (1958) and *The Purple Flower* (1927)

In staging these Pan-African plays, *Vejigantes* (1958) and *The Purple Flower* (1927) with digital media and live performance, I was able to reconfigure images and texts of underrepresented others in contemporary culture, and to recover their voices despite criticism of the “unusual” experimentation, settings, and spaces created for each piece. By taking an Africa-centered approach or the *Africanesque* with digital media with the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble, I was able to stage, for example, Black feminist (re) memorials highlighted representations of racial and gender stereotypes in the play. I captured the digital realities of Black women experience by rewriting the archives, and reorganizing projection images, and word creating psychic dimensions. Then, I showed how Black women from the 1958 and 1927 in

⁶⁰ Joseph Roach, (*Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33.

the plays hauntingly resonated with today's audiences, who viewed the challenges of representation throughout both plays through contemporary eyes. The sexual assault scene in *Vejigantes*, for example, with projections of morphing masks, and audio recordings of disembodied voices, reported on Toña's perceived character "flaw" instead of perpetrator of the sexual assault. The representation of racialized violence in the scene became the link between issues of race and gender as violent processes. By the end of the play, Mama Toña made redemptive and restorative actions that centered the representation of an Afro-Latina and Caribbean woman center stage by the end of the play.

The repetition of images, videos, and audios in *The Purple Flower*, was deliberately jarring as a metaphor for the "Us's" laboring in the valley and being prevented from achieving the purple flower growing on the hill. In directing these Pan-African plays, *Vejigantes* and *The Purple Flower*, I staged Black feminist (re)memorials as the past that seemingly was about the present day, since many of these issues are relevant today. They were processes of recovering and uncovering from the archives. In the casting and blocking, I created memorials to the African American and Caribbean women encountered in the plays with a focus on the *Africanesque* as a cultural icon in each play, the reference of an "Africa" through shared experiences in Black feminist cultures. Using an activist performance mode, the plays countered and decoded the racializing effects, and in so doing, restored, and centered Black feminist experiences on a Pan-African stage.

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