The Radical Archive of Preservation: From Acts to Archives in Black Production Culture

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THE RADICAL ARCHIVE OF PRESERVATION: FROM ACTS TO ARCHIVES IN BLACK PRODUCTION CULTURE

by

SHADY RADICAL

Under the Direction of Ethan Tussey, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The Radical Archive of Performance: From Acts to Archives in Black Preservation explores issues of the archive and preservation in Black performance culture. This research project asks: if today’s professional archival and preservation practices are adequate for the identification, preservation, and accessibility of Black epistemologies materialized through performance; how strategies of resistance and improvisation work with or against notions of access and preservation in archival science; and if Tyler Perry Studios can be considered a radical archive of Black performance. After Cedric Robinson, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten, and in the spirit of the Black Radical Tradition, I argue improvisation, discordance, and trace as the conceptual reserves of Black epistemologies and demonstrates radical acts of preservation in performance. This project is conceptualized as a way of thinking through archival and curatorial challenges when working with
Black performance immateriality and ephemerality. Using archival science, production studies, and performance theory, I illustrate ways Black production cultures, from art exhibitions to Film/TV productions, navigate issues of materiality in the archive. In order to investigate the quality of preservation of Black epistemologies in contemporary Black performance, I use Tyler Perry Studios production culture as a case study to examine objects, rituals, and spaces using a Media Industries method.

INDEX WORDS: Tyler perry studios, Black radical tradition, Improvisation, Trace, Discordance
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SHADY RADICAL

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BLACK PRODUCTION CULTURE

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DEDICATION

This project would not have been possible without God; The Black Radical Tradition; and freedom fighters around the world. To Windy Oya Radical, thank you for encouraging me to trust the direction of the wind. To Eryk Radical for your song. To Lee and Armster Bailey, my parental unit, for spoiling me with love and instilling excitement towards life in me. To Michael Patterson Sr., my dad, for the blood of the fight, preserving the land of our ancestors, and always giving me new stories to tell. To my family. Thank you to my dear friends Kye Buckland, Jameel “Squirt” Griffin, Greg Wray, Derron Cherry, Jennifer Careere, Curthbeth Nwenuke, and Lauren Neefe for the boosts of confidence and reminding me that I may not be a gang member, but I am a definitely a gangster. Lastly, thank you to all those who have come and gone along the way.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Black American cultural producers use their art to explore, examine, and comment on identity, subjectivity, and survival. Filmmakers such as Steve McQueen and Ava DuVernay have portrayed—to wide acclaim—the impact of chattel slavery on the American conscience and the lives of Black Americans in films like 12 Years a Slave\(^1\) and 13th\(^2\), respectively. These masterful productions enrich our understanding of the lives of people who endured slavery’s cruelty because each film identifies, collects, catalogues, and exhibits how these people resisted, improvised, survived violence, subjugation, and control. I will argue that Tyler Perry Studios (TPS) operates in a similar capacity: to capture, share, and preserve the lived experiences of Black people and their ongoing struggle for racial equality, liberation, and freedom.

TPS accomplishes these goals through the television shows and movies it produces, but also through its production culture, which is steeped in Black, improvisational, and discordant community practices. These qualities make it an ideal site for theorizing the potential of a Radical Archive. Radical Archives preserve histories that have been hidden or ignored in traditional archives because of systemic oppression and racism. Radical Archives are performance and preservation practices and communities producing memory-based work without a formal archive. Since resistance is the defining feature of Black radical practices, I look for resistance as the quality of radical activity to identify radical archives. Using Sara Ahmed’s concept of willfulness, defined as a failure to comply with standard archival practices, I assess resistance in the production culture of TPS to show: 1) how Black bodies operate as archives; and

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\(^1\) “‘12 Years A Slave’: 160 Years Later, A Memoir Becomes A Movie,” NPR (NPR, October 17, 2013), https://www.npr.org/2013/10/17/235486707/12-years-a-slave-160-years-later-a-memoir-becomes-a-movie.

2) how this culture creates new methods for preserving Black culture without a formal archive.

Ahmed states, “A willfulness archive would refer to the documents that are passed down in which willfulness comes up, as a trait, perhaps even as a character trait. Even if the documents are not contained in one place, the bodies that possess them could be described as containers.”

Here, Ahmed conveys two key ideas: first, she proposes that willfulness becomes a document when it becomes visible; second, she suggests that the documentation process can transform the body into an archive. Following these theories, I respond to Saidiya Hartman’s challenge to historians and archival researchers that they should seek alternate approaches to address absences in historical memory by considering immateriality and resistance in Black performance.

Hartman calls this idea “Black radical practice” and draws from the work of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B Dubois, C.L.R. James, and Cedric Robinson. In 1983 Robinson coined the phrase “The Black Radical Tradition” in his seminal book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Today, the Black Radical Tradition (BRT) is commonly used by theorists to refer to political activity that remembers, animates, and restores blackness and resistance in pursuit of liberation. For Hartman, the BRT is a sustained practice that engages history and modernity even as it refuses the institutional violence that makes oppression and premature death defining characteristics of Black life. In her writing, Hartman makes the abstract relations of power in everyday life visible. She writes that chattel slavery created a type of

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enclosure that positions Black people both inside and outside democracy. However, she continues, Black people challenge these confines through waywardness and similar acts of resistance. Therefore, BRT is also a practice-based project that’s historiographical in nature and engages with the archive as a primary strategy.

Using BRT as the theoretical basis for this project, I present the Chitlin Circuit and the exhibition *Radical Presence* to think about performance and production cultures as radical practice and to conceptualize models for preserving and curating Black performance practices. To clarify my engagement with tradition in this project, I offer Soyica Diggs Colbert’s explanation of tradition: “the creation of connections as a process that recurs through restored behavior, which fundamentally renders the process multi-temporal” and “an ever evolving spatial model that moves in multiple directions.”

Under American slavery, Blacks were restricted from reading and writing; therefore, they could produce nothing that we commonly perceive as archival materials. This lack of tangible evidence does not mean, however, that there is no archive, no record of people who lived as slaves. Black stories and traditions had to evolve in order to endure, so the owners of these stories forged survival techniques that circumvented formal archival institutions controlled by the same government agencies that restricted all aspects of Black life and thought.

In this paper, I expand on Hartman’s ideas by proposing that the Black body is the primary site for knowing, preserving, and sharing Black cultural material. Following this same line of understanding, other archives have also attempted to collect and provide access to living archives. For example, the Southern Labor Archives: Voices of Labor Oral History Project at

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10 DAMMAN. Artform
Georgia State University; Cora Ginsburg, a textile, antique, and costume collection in New York City; and Interference Archive, a collection of rebel and revolution-related materials are alternative spaces to the traditional archive model.

I examine this theory by studying the mostly-Black creative team at Tyler Perry Studios (TPS) and recording how preservation takes place within this unique production culture. At TPS, little formal documentation happens during the often-hectic production schedule. Workers carry much of the institutional knowledge in their bodies and they impart this knowledge communally. This flexible, somewhat improvisational, technique, when perceived through the lens of tradition as multi-temporal and multi-directional, echoes the preservation strategies employed by their ancestors. TPS workers’ bodily archival activities are a continuation of that tradition. In this dissertation, I illustrate the processes and strategies of radical preservation from embodied act to embodied archives of resistance.

I have had many opportunities to study these ideas from a variety of perspectives. In college, I played the part of Toby in an all-female production of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. Later, I worked as a dresser for New York’s Fashion Week and as costumer for a number of productions including Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and various Broadway musicals. After completing my master’s degree at New York University, I moved to Georgia and began working at Tyler Perry Studios in 2011. I worked as an intern, production assistant, costume coordinator, set costumer, key costumer, and radical archivist on films and television shows including For Colored Girls, Love They Neighbor, Have and Have Nots, If Loving You is Wrong, House of Payne, Bruh, Young Dylan, and Sistas. I have also worked on productions outside of Tyler Perry Studios, such as Hunger Games, Survivor’s Remorse, Greenleaf, and Vampire Diaries, among others.
In 2013, I visited the *Radical Presence* exhibition on Black Performance Art at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery. The exhibition initially included a video piece by Adrian Piper, and this work, in particular, prompted my thinking about embodied memory and intangible Black archival material. I never actually got to see this piece because by the time I visited the exhibition, Piper’s work had been removed from the exhibition. Instead of a monitor showing Peter Kennedy’s *Becoming Mythic Being*, there was a note explaining artwork’s absence. The note also stated Piper’s position on the curatorial intent and execution of the exhibition, and re-presented a bit of the correspondence between the artist and the curator. Adrian Piper felt the curatorial focus on Black performance artists perpetuated the exclusion of this work from the canon. It is still interesting to me the most vivid thing I remember about the exhibition is related to what was missing.

Upon leaving the gallery, I wondered why the work wasn’t completely erased. Would it disturb the flow, layout and/or design of the exhibition? Would people be outraged that Adrian Piper was missing from an exhibition surveying Black Performance artists? Did the note itself become a new piece, another part of the work, and/or part of the exhibition? How can we make sense of this trace? Which and whose traces become part of the official record? I wondered about the relationships between objects present and absent in exhibitions as compared to objects present and absent in archives.

Exhibiting objects highlights their cultural value, just as archiving object denotes their historical value. Herein, lies the problem. The archive demands the objects be physically present however, if acts of resistance, rather than objects, are the substrate of Black American culture, how can that culture physically manifest in order to be preserved? Because resistance is an act or performance it is considered ephemeral-nonarchival in traditional archival science and,
therefore, difficult to culturally valuate. In addition, absence, improvisation, and invisibility are all commonly-used resistance strategies within Black culture that are impossible for typical archives to preserve. We must find alternate methods for preservation.

I began noticing different strategies of preservation during my internship at TPS, a few years prior to the Radical Presence exhibition. These observations also inspired me to think of Black production as an archive. In 2010, I was working as a dresser for fashion week with Barbara Berman, a well-known fashion professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology. That job helped me land an internship in the costumes department with Alex Bovaird, an assistant costume designer for TPS’s film For Colored Girls. I worked in the TPS Manhattan office and worked long hours, sometimes reporting as early as 6am and leaving as 10pm. The internship was unpaid, but I received college credit. I had just been accepted to New York University’s Costume and Curatorial Studies program and by the time I began my coursework, I was already a quarter way through my degree.

Working on For Colored Girls was not my first encounter with TPS, Perry’s work was an integral part of my cultural landscape during my childhood and adolescent years. My first experience with his work was as a high school student (ca. 2001) on a holiday weekend when my family all gathered at my sister’s house in suburban Waterbury, Connecticut for a party. A bootleg DVD of a Perry theatre production played on a large flat screen TV. Although most of the family was watching the play, some folks were telling jokes, laughing, eating, and drinking. I remember feeling confused about watching the hazy image of a stage play on TV, but I understood the experience as a good, fun family time.

My second encounter was attending a performance of The Marriage Counselor the Beacon Theatre in New York sometime in the late 2000s. I was an adult by this time, and I recall
that it was a very special occasion because I was there with my mother and sister. My sister is 16 years older than me, so we weren’t all together very often. The theatre was packed and loud. The audience was engaged in the performance, so much so that some members talked back to the actors on stage. In some theatres, this type of behavior would result in the “respondent” being ejected from the show, but here, it was perfectly acceptable and even heightened our enjoyment of the play. It was a great time. Through all these moments, I connected my own experiences of Black culture to what I was studying and learning in the classroom and in the workplace. I began to understand how TPS archives Black culture through performance; organizes these archives through production; and provides access to this material through distribution of DVD, theatrical releases, and partnerships with networks and online streaming services like BET+ and Netflix.

This dissertation project is the result of many years of costuming, research, observations, and involvement at Tyler Perry Studios. Prior to the onset of the COVID Pandemic, Mr. Perry authorized me to start working on the archive as we had discussed a few times over the course of 10 years. My pursuit of this very degree and project was inspired by the opportunity to establish the archive we discussed. Therefore, this project is a major outcome of many hours spent at the studio, conversations with industry professionals, and preservation work with students from my Black Performance and The Archive course at Georgia State University. As radical archivists, we worked very hard to lay the foundation for the archive at TPS. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances our work was disrupted unceremoniously. Today, as I continue to preserve Black performance culture with local artists and performance companies, I also continue my pursuit of a sustainable preservation program at TPS as marked by the existence of this dissertation.
Working in the spaces between exhibition production and media production convinced me that the only way to examine the archive at Tyler Perry Studios is to use a combined methodology from performance studies, and archival science. In this project, I employ media industries methods to document how TPS preserves Black archives through performances; therefore, I examine objects, spaces, and rituals using John Caldwell’s critical industrial methods to identify the contours of a radical archive.

Other scholars have also used Caldwell to analyze Black production cultures, but they approach Black culture within media production differently. Alfred L. Martin and Kristen Warner both incorporate Caldwell’s methods of interviewing industry personnel. Martin uses these first-hand accounts to centralize industrial workers’ and their subjects’ and audiences’ Blackness in order to demonstrate how black sitcoms make space for gayness. Warner talks with producers to explore how they use Blackness to define and locate diversity in casting and production, and how these efforts often fall short in representing cultural difference. Her aim is to get producers to adopt better strategies of inclusivity around race and ethnicity. At the other end of the spectrum, Beretta Smith-Shomade considers Caldwell’s insights on audience reception in 1980s-1990s television commercials. She finds that an increased desire for hyperactive and excessive style motivated corporations to employ Black sound to sell their products.

Similar to these scholars, I am interested in the ways in which Blackness is used by producers and how that strategy is evidenced within a production culture. By examining how workers improvise, the material evidence of that improvisation, the ways TPS simultaneously

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adheres to and eschews standard industrial practice, and how the studio builds its own alternate production history, I can arrange, organize, and make the TPS Radical Archive accessible.

After all, the methods I propose and use in this dissertation can become a model for archives working with Black performance and production cultures. Like Abigail De Kosnik’s *Rogue Archives* which suggests that digital cultures and fandom have ways of preserving culture on the Internet, I propose that Black cultural producers preserve ways of knowing in their bodies and deploy them in their everyday workflows. Through this project, I argue that Black production cultures are radical archives. I offer The Radical Archive as a framework for identifying, examining, and supporting Black production cultures that seek to establish formal archival systems. This framework may also help archivists identify archive-able materials within Black production culture. Archival scholars and practitioners can design strategies of restorative justice, adopt new vocabularies, make space for oral histories, and modify naming conventions for people underrepresented, overlooked, and ignored. If absence, invisibility, non-archivability, and resistance signify Black culture in the archive, then a radical politics embedded in the design of the archive is required to render Blackness visible, to preserve and honor it.

In sum, this project relies on the theoretical underpinnings of performance, improvisation, and resistance in Black struggle and radical politics towards freedom and liberation as articulated by Cedric Robinson, Fred Moten, and Saidiya Hartman. Through analyses and case studies, I investigate a series of radical acts of preservation evidenced in Black performance at TPS. Ultimately, this project traces strategies of resistance; first, as modes of survival and second, as objects of cultural preservation. The focus of these inquiries, ultimately, is to conclude whether current professional preservation practices are adequate for conserving Black Performance epistemologies and to suggest ways we can remedy the archival erasure of Black lives.
1.1 Literature Review

This project adds to the work of scholars and practitioners from Black Studies, media industries, performance studies, costume studies, museum studies, and archival science. It is a research process that includes discourse, content and textual analyses, and case studies. While this project meddles in a wide variety of academic discourses, it is designed to intervene in debates primarily in archives and preservation, using Black performance theory; and conducting analyses with media industries approaches and methods.

In a world of post-truth, automation, and constantly evolving information technology the role and value of archivists is constantly in question. 24-hour internet access to information has created an illusion of complete and unfettered information availability. Archival scholars constantly argue that their principal responsibilities are professional recordkeeping and contextualization of information. The other rallying cry insists that providing access to data is significant work that is irreplaceable by big data, algorithms, internet archives, and automated retrieval technology. In our contemporary moment, meaning must be contextualized because truth is socially constructed and constantly shifting. Never has increased attention to and awareness of the accession, recordkeeping and description levels of archiving been more important.

In Archival Futures, Caroline Brown presents a collection of essays that argue the need for archivists to assist in the face of mass communication and increasing technological automation. Kate Theimer’s contribution to this anthology, the essay “It’s the End of the Archival Profession As We Know It, and I Feel Fine,” provides the basis other contributors expand upon by highlighting “the importance of narrative, storytelling, meaning-making, and

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contextualizing”¹⁶ in our society’s memories. Although a lot of information is freely accessible and available through the internet, what users find through basic Google searches might not be up-to-date, relevant, tested, or sufficiently measured. The multi-authored paper with Sue McKemmish, “Decolonizing recordkeeping and archival praxis in childhood out-of-home Care and indigenous archival collections” highlights the influence of colonial values and constructs embedded in recordkeeping and archiving systems¹⁷. Even though this research looks at child protection in the Australian context, our racialized past and present society mirrors issues of colonization in Australian Indigenous and Aborigine communities, therefore providing insight into the impact of power inequities and marginalization on recordkeeping, ways of knowing, truth-telling, and archival autonomy. Recordkeeping systems that reflect on the cultural memory of a society require a contribution as racially, economically, and culturally diverse as the population in order to protect communities against exploitation. Angela Aguayo’s Danette Pugh Patton’s, and Molly Bandonis’s “Black Lives and Justices with the Archive” call to action responds to racism and police violence with the need and urgency for archiving and archiving professionals to record and report the stories and narratives of afflicted peoples and communities in a media culture that quickly buries content and public dialogue¹⁸. The authors respond to racism and police violence by urging archives and archivists to record and report the stories and narratives of afflicted peoples and communities; to preserve the stories that a 24-hour news cycle quickly buries and public dialogue drowns out.¹⁹ This essay captures the activist potential of the

¹⁷ McKemmish S., S., Bone, J., Evans, J
¹⁸ Aguayo, Angela J., Danette Pugh Patton, and Molly Brandonis. “Black Lives and Justice with the Archive: A Call to Action” Black Camera 9, no 2
archive and its capacity to protect black life by creating dialogue and visibility around police brutality. In short, it asserts, in order for the archive to function as a tool for social change it must include diversity in representation and strategies to map the everyday. Recordkeeping systems that reflect a society’s cultural memory require contributions as racially, economically, and culturally diverse as the population in order to protect communities against exploitation.

Jacques Derrida’s historical and philosophical exploration of the archive in *Archive Fever* poignantly describes the archive’s history and relationship to authority, cultural hegemony, and policing. The permanence and control of archival science creates issues of historicity for performance which, like Blackness, embodies the ephemeral and fleeting. However, by the end of this essay written in 1995, Derrida acknowledges that everything cannot be known through the archive. There are secrets that are kept out of the archives, intentionally or accidentally. This ambiguity opens the archive for activist potential and for continued historical investigation and discovery.

Fortunately, early performance studies scholars pointed to the body and embodied experiences as a site to study the ephemerality of performance and the history of the now. Diana Taylor’s *Archive and the Repertoire* turns towards the role of liveness and embodied memory and its significance for how we understand the Americas. The notion of detecting hidden knowledge through performance and embodied experiences motivates this project to explore how bodies tell stories, even as it focuses too narrowly on live material and practice-based methodologies. Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* also thinks about

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performance, but questions visibility and its relationship to power.\textsuperscript{22} Her skepticism of the visible as the representation of truth insists on gestures and memories as ways of seeing, representing, and detecting perspectives.

Cedric Robinson reveals Black radicalism as resistance from a political-economic perspective through a historiographical analysis of W.E.B. DuBois’s scholarship. W.E.B. DuBois was a writer, editor, professor, social researcher, and public intellectual, but Robinson adds a further vocation to this list, calling DuBois “one of the finest historians ever developed in the United States.”\textsuperscript{23} DuBois’s \textit{Black Reconstruction in America} presented a theory of history based on economic analysis and class struggle. He employed methods of historical analysis to reinterpret the period of Reconstruction in American History and suggested ideology, human motives, and social relations were the root causes for Reconstruction’s failure. First, he argues that the African worker, as free labor through the institution of American slavery, was the basis for World capitalism. More pointedly, the capitalist system instilled overwhelming feelings of subjugation and inferiority in African workers; these teachings were supported by pseudoscientists, politicians, religious leaders, and White supremacy.

Lastly, DuBois exposes historic propaganda disseminated during Reconstruction and discusses how educational materials in public schools characterized the negro as ignorant, lazy, dishonest, and extravagant.\textsuperscript{24} These materials blamed the negro for Reconstruction’s failure and created narratives that overlooked, dismissed, and ignored historical facts. While this same theory can be applied to an analysis of production culture of Tyler Perry Studios suggesting that the studio’s lack of recordkeeping practices breeds exploitive practices of unskilled, I abstain

\textsuperscript{23} IBID pg 185
\textsuperscript{24} Dubois, W.E.B. \textit{Black Reconstruction} pg 711
from that argument and instead seek to understand how this production culture values Black cultural artifacts, materiality, and how workers are using embodied memory and improvisation to perform successfully within these spaces.

Following Uri McMillan’s study of Black feminist performance artists and their contributions, I reflect on his rendering of the silences and absences of Black women from the canon of performance art. While he uses performances of self-exhibition and dangerous subterfuge as guiding principles in his definition of Black performance art, I focus on improvisation as resistance, hewing more closely to the ideas of Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten.

Saidiya Hartman’s ideas on narratology and visuality encourage us to look towards the margins of spectacle in slavery’s afterlives to challenge the implications of the visual in narrative storytelling. In a way, she suggests that one’s culture cannot be understood based on history books and archival material alone, instead we should search in places outside of the official record to understand the meanings created, circulating, and sustained in the lives of the people.

These moments are usually missing from the record because they are not seen as significant to the historian or recordkeeper. Therefore, this project responds to Hartman in two ways: first, detailing the ways TPS represents this method of recuperation in the stories they tell and second, by looking at the everyday tasks of below the line workers at TPS in order to distill how agency is constructed and meaning is made within a Black performance production culture. Fred Moten’s In the Break proposes that improvisation/resistance is foundational to understanding Black expression and the Black Radical Tradition as it relates to politics,

economics, aesthetics, and Marxist thought.\textsuperscript{27} Though resistance can be found in music and theatre practices (some examples of these appear in later chapters), resistance is a defining feature of Black performance, rather than a side-effect. Therefore, TPS as a Black entrepreneurial production studio represents a critical site of investigation with consideration to how it is situated and criticized in media history.

While resistance and improvisation define Black performance and radicalism in this project, these activities and their expression are contingent on temporality and social conditions such as racism, sexism, classism, and so forth. Because these conditions are endemic to American culture, they are also significant to this project’s theoretical basis. I look to Kristin Warner’s \textit{The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting} as a model.\textsuperscript{28} Warner’s analysis of casting explores how conceptions of race, racism, and colorblindness have impacted casting strategies from early theatre history through contemporary television programming. Following Warner’s example, I seek to understand the impact of race and racism on Black performance, resistance culture, and production culture as keys to discerning preservation processes. In so doing, this project challenges and radically alters traditional notions of archives and preservation.

In the absence of traditional archives, relying on ephemerality, and within the context of racism, I use performance theories, critical race theory, and media industries methods to reveal what is hiding in plain sight. I explicate the visual, material and ephemeral, to find how we can preserve a culture of resistance and Blackness.

1.2 Methodological Framework

My methodology combines methods and theories from production culture studies, Black studies, archival science, and theatre studies. John T. Caldwell’s Critical Industrial Practices method identifies the aspects of production cultures that buttress meaning and agency in comparison to the formulated statements and press releases provided by official company representatives.\(^{29}\) While scholars and theorists write lengthy exposés, filmmakers’ knowledge resides in “tools, machines, artifacts, iconographies, working methods, professional rituals, and narratives.”\(^{30}\) They analyze deep texts, artifacts, rituals, practices, and spaces through observation, interviews, textual analyses, and economic and industrial analyses. This method offers a way to approach embedded production knowledge laterally. Caldwell argues for “concrete ways by which media scholars might reconsider its methods in the face of an industry that is increasingly occupied with workaday forms of critical and cultural analysis that are at some points privately exchanged and at other times publicly dramatized.”\(^{31}\) After Caldwell, I analyze physical spaces, marketing strategies, performances, and production artifacts of TPS as differently-situated deep texts.

Although this project does not look at digital archives as a point of departure, Abigail De Kosnik’s *Rogue Archives* offers a framework for approaching alternative forms of cultural preservation and memory building through fandom and digital capacities.\(^{32}\) Far from the aristocratic, exclusionary, and privileged archival standards and practices established by archival studies foundational thinkers (French archivist Natalis de Wailly, British archivist Hilary

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\(^{30}\) Ibid, pg 345

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 3

Jenkinson, and American Archivist T.R. Schellenberg), media users from fans to hackers use the internet to collect digital materials and serve as resources for women, queer identities, and other archivally underserved communities.

Following this idea, I argue that like Kosnik’s rogue archivists, workers and production crew members at Tyler Perry Studios perform archival work: they collect, describe, and present forgotten stories. Even though these stories have been dismissed by many critics as stereotyped, sexist, and patriarchal they nonetheless represent rich epistemologies and resistance strategies found in Black lived experiences and articulated through Black performance traditions.Figuring out mediated Blackness’s role in the construction of Black identities and experiences requires a media industries approach to examine the cultural preservation practices of Black performance cultures.

Underrepresented and/or underserved communities continue to find ways and spaces to build connections and share knowledge forged in oppressive conditions. Andre Brock’s *Distributed Blackness* argues that Black digital networking provides an alternative platform and virtual environment for unfettered Black expression.\(^{33}\) He examines the intersection between race and technology through Black digital studies to illustrate how identity and agency are constructed and performed online. Interestingly, his conceptual framework illustrates how a Black technocultural matrix, distinct from a western technocultural matrix, allows for a Black technological practice and perspective that thinks around resistance and models of oppression in order to suggest a different relationship to technology than typically described.\(^{34}\) Brock offers a strategy to examine how improvisation can form a sort of invagination within Black performance cultures.

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\(^{34}\) J. Khadijah Abdurahman, Stanley Munoz, and Ilan Mandel (Interviewers, We Be Imagining Series) in discussion with Andre L. Brock, April 2020.
culture. Brock’s project shows how dynamics in coding and design impact how users feel and perform in specific virtual environments. Similarly, I argue that design and organization at TPS have the potential to decenter or obstruct active awareness of one’s oppression. It is important to note that racial dynamics and thus my conceptions of Black performance are still active; however, I posit that centering improvisation forms another relationality to performance independent of phenomenological Blackness, rooted in a discourse on humanity, and complicating practices of preservation.

Fred Moten’s *In the Break* proposes that improvisation/resistance is foundational to understanding Black expression and the Black Radical Tradition as it relates to politics, economics, aesthetics, and Marxist thought. For Moten, resistance is characterized by moments of improvisation. Improvisation is the defining feature of Black performance rather than an aspect of the work. He says,

> See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation. This surplus lyricism—think here of the muted, mutating horns of Tricky Sam Nanton or Cootie Williams—is what a lot of people are after when they invoke the art and culture—the radical (both rooted and out there, immanent and transcendent) sensuality—of and for my people.

Moten’s references to trombonist Tricky Sam Nanton (1926-1946) and trumpeter Cootie Williams (1928-1940) of Duke Ellington’s Big Band is a poignant illustration of improvisation and the freedom drive in jazz music. In many ways, Ellington is used to define improvisation in jazz music. His musical arrangements featuring experimental solos on top of challenging accompaniments surprised audiences at the Cotton Club and in music halls around the world. The growling, deep tones, and plunger techniques were some of the brass section’s distinctive

35 Moten, pg 26.
features, but Ellington’s interest in the individual musician’s sound was key to not only how the arrangements were composed, but more significantly how they were performed in the moment.

Moten’s description of Black performance locates the individual performer on the outside, but still engaging the structure. This position reflects a dynamic embedded in the art form, which he calls improvisation. Creative decisions are made at the intersection of internal and embodied knowledge and the constraints of institutional standards. These decisions are sometimes subtle, but distinct departures from established form. Improvisation can change the experience of an arrangement by introducing the unexpected, causing ruptures, breaks, and disorder in time, space, and meaning. Improvisation can also be described as a manipulation of things, perceptions, objects that draw attention towards or away from a thing that allows the agent to move. Improvisation is a form of movement akin to freedom. A movement within constraint.

Improvisation echoes Hartman’s method of critical fabulation, an improvisational strategy of storytelling that relies equally on creativity and scholarly research to maneuver around western ways of knowing that suppress Black epistemologies and stories. Further, I see Hartman’s recuperative storytelling as a radicalization of the archival process. Like the feminist praxis of historical revisioning, critical fabulation enables undocumented lives access to the historical record. Therefore, this project treats portrayals found in TPS productions as a form of critical fabulation and the performances as archival objects. Thinking this way, we can describe TPS as a radical archive, the performances as acts of preservation, and the materials as radical archival objects.

In Black Marxism, Cedric Robinson describes the limitations of Marxism and socialism as political economic theories for those enslaved involved in the pursuit of liberation suggests that
these concepts did not consider the enslaved in the western context as possessing a distinct
culture that motivated resistance to plantation life. Robinson says, “The Black radical tradition
that they were to rediscover from a Black historical experience nearly grounded under the
intellectual weight and authority of the official European version of the past, was to be the
foundation upon which they stood.” The tension between the official European version of the
past and Black lived experience produced skepticism towards western standards, norms, and
ideals which I describe as discordance. I find discordance as a central theme in Black studies
discourse as addressed through concepts like Dubois’s double consciousness, Henry Louis
Gates signifying, Fanon’s triple consciousness, and Ralph Ellison’s Black is, Black Ain’t.
This tension is felt in the production work at the studio and found in semi-embedded deep texts
that have dual meanings for the company and the audience. In chapter 3, Presenting Resistance:
Black Production Culture is Discordant, I use this theory of discordance to analyze Tyler Perry’s
newsfeed, the special features sections of DVDs, and speeches made by Perry with the goal of
determining how discordance shapes archival material and how Black production culture is
shaped by discordance.

Following the idea that Black production culture is discordant because of its relationship
to western history, Black production culture becomes a project of trace. Robinson argues that
W.E.B. DuBois’s project on the period of Reconstruction was a historiographical analysis that
traces how Reconstruction’s failure was blamed on the negro. Robinson argues that DuBois uses

36 Robinson, pg 170
37 Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt. The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches. Chicago,
University Press, 2014.
that baseless finger-pointing as the basis for his political economic analysis of enslaved people’s resistance, or the Black Radical Tradition. After Robinson, Fred Moten draws a line from the beating of Aunt Hester in Fredrick Douglass’s autobiography to the musical performance of Abbey Lincoln on a 1960s record.\(^41\) For Moten, this performance bears the trace of resistance that marks it as Black performance. Lincoln’s emotional and bodily responses to pain and violence press into the archive of emotional trauma; are shared by a distinct community; and form the base of expressive cultural production. In *Preserving Resistance: Black Production Culture is Trace*, I present TPS as another project that tries to recover alternate histories by tracing its existence alongside the official western record of history. I examine the soundstages, parody posters, and TPS web pages, all of which Caldwell calls publicly-disclosed deep texts; i.e., materials explicitly designed for public consumption that offer a peek into studio practices.

Lastly, reflecting on Beretta Smith-Shomade’s research on Black Entertainment Television (BET), Blackness, and capitalism, I conduct an industrial analysis to determine if TPS as a radical archive, Black production studio, and production culture fulfills its promise to its constituents as “a place where even dreams believe.”\(^42\) In *Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television*, Smith-Shomade examines whether BET’s products and company ultimately serve or fail their consumers through screen representations, image-perception, and market viability.\(^43\) Through focus groups, interviews and textual analysis, she produces an industrial analysis and consumerist assessment to determine how capitalism succeeds and fails African Americans through programming, practices, and its position in US society. Following

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\(^{41}\) Moten


this approach, I seek to investigate how TPS fits within American culture; measure how it performs as a Black space within media culture and determine the value of its preservation activities.

Over the course of three chapters, I investigate deep texts from two different registers: production materials (primary) and archival objects (secondary). Therefore, following Caldwell, I identify, examine, and highlight improvisation, discordance, and trace as features of Black production cultures through fully-embedded, semi-embedded, and publicly-disclosed TPS deep texts.

1.3 Chapter Outline

My dissertation contains three main chapters as well as an introduction and conclusion. I use three conceptual frameworks to describe Black production culture: improvisation, discordance, and trace. In chapter two, *Preserving Resistance: Black Production is Trace*, I explore how artists encounter, perform, preserve, and present resistance in *Radical Presence*, an exhibition curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver that exposed the limits of traditional archives and questioned how bodies preserve resistant materiality. I approach the exhibition’s artifacts, rituals, and spaces as traces of an alternate history operating alongside the official canon from a curatorial and performance theory perspective. This exercise provides a way to see how black production cultures trace alternative lineages adjacent to and often ignored by standard industrial practices as typified by genre and award season fare. Also in this chapter, I analyze the Tyler Perry Studios soundstages as commemorative structures; parody posters as objects of branding, marketing, and advertising; and the opening of the studios as an event that memorialized the achievements of Black entertainers. These publicly disclosed deep texts offer archivists strategies for approaching radical preservation methods found in Black production culture.
In the third chapter, *Performing Resistance: Black Production Culture is Discordant*, I examine discordance as a feature of Black popular culture and thus Black production culture. Through analysis of organization, workflow, and practices, I show how production at Tyler Perry Studios is discordant with industry standards and norms. After Stuart Hall and Andre Brock’s technocultural constructions of Black identity, I find and evaluate forms of discordance in company structure, creative praxis, and historical narrativization of the studio. These semi-embedded deep texts show how Tyler Perry and the studio variously align and clash with industry norms. These kinds of deep texts are visible and meaningful to the public, but also have meaning (sometimes different) for industry players. I examine the newsfeed on Tyler Perry’s personal website, DVD special features, and speeches to show how these materials double as objects of discordance and examples of radical preservation.

In chapter four, *Performing Resistance: Black Production Culture is Improvisational*, I build on the work of Robinson and Moten by looking for improvisation within the materiality of the TPS production culture. I examine everyday materials of TPS workers and pay particular attention to their annotated documents and improvisational techniques. I can draw on these fully-embedded deep texts to manifest the improvisational nature of the work at the studio. I then can explain what inspires this improvisation and how improvisation offers a solution to working conditions. From there, I explain how notations and marginalia within Black production culture should be seen as the calling card of a radical archive rather than simple pieces of ephemera.

1.4 Utility

From these case studies, a toolkit emerges that explains how archivists can identify and document a radical archive. I provide insights on how to conduct recordkeeping and preservation practices with regards to: Black performance,
vulnerable communities, and ephemeral materiality. Here, I deliver my discoveries from deep text analyses I conducted in the previous chapters on improvisation, discordance, and trace. Circling back to Hartman and her insistence on the everyday as a site of resistance and redress, my analyses recovers strategies and activities of resistance living in Black performances and the material hidden, ignored, or cast aside. This project provides a strategy for institutions looking to preserve the lives, stories, and epistemologies of the underrepresented in our communities.
PRESERVING RESISTANCE: BLACK PRODUCTION CULTURE AS TRACE

Archival science prioritizes materiality and chronology. *Respect du fonds, original order,* and *provenance* are the working principles at the foundation of professional archival practices today. For example, in *Preserving Theatrical Legacy: An Archiving Manual for Theatre Companies* published December 2021, archivists are encouraged to protect and maintain the way materials are found when moving them to an archival arrangement. This assumes the cultural materials are always tangible and transportable, despite the theatrical or performance-based nature of the company.

In “The Footprint and the Stepping Foot” Kimberley Anderson urges archivists to consider internal structures embedded in communities before attempting to adapt material to fit traditional models of preservation. One strategy she proposes is to look at the way communities intentionally preserve their cultural material. Traditional/Western archives prioritize objectivity as a measurement for a record’s evidentiary value. Material that has survived its primary administrative function is considered more truthful and valid, as it was created prior to influences that could affect the record and/or memory making process. Anderson challenges the value of objectivity and suggests that intentionality should be used as the basis for a record’s evidentiary value. The intention to act as evidence can be found in the design of the material. So, we must ask ourselves, which material has been designed to extend beyond its current temporal location?

In this chapter, I consider how artists encounter, perform, preserve, and present resistance in the *Radical Presence* exhibition as a model for how Black performance and production cultures trace alternate histories. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences establishes the American cinematic archive by defining excellence in film through awards and recognition, but in doing so it ignores and obfuscates a history of media that does not meet Academy-
established standards or reflect its aesthetic ideals. These cases call for radical practice to expose the archive’s limits by tracing a parallel history of Black production that has always existed outside and within the canon. I conceptualize *Radical Presence* as a model project of radical practice. Through exhibition design, cataloguing, programming and event production, Valerie Cassel Oliver, the curator, traces resistant materials while illustrating how artists have used strategies of trace to challenge narratives of racial capitalism, sexism, and oppression in their work.

In the first section, I analyze *Radical Presence* (RP) as a site of preservation for Black production cultures. I show how Oliver preserves acts of resistance through the publication of a catalogue, the organization of an exhibition, and performance programming. To find resistant materials, I approach the exhibition’s artifacts, rituals, and spaces from a performance theory perspective. Here I look for materials that resist capture, representation, and description by examining preservation strategies and sound.

2.1 Trace in Radical Presence

Starting in 2012, *RP* traveled to 5 different cities in 4 years. Originally curated for Contemporary Art Museum Houston (CAMH), the exhibition traveled to Manhattan, Harlem, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. The exhibition was made possible by grants from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and patrons, benefactors, and donors to CAMH’s Major Exhibition Fund. The exhibition surveyed Black Contemporary performance art starting with artists like Benjamin Patterson and Adrian Piper, who have largely produced work in New York; trained in programs like Skowhegan’s School of Painting and Sculpture; and center resistance and the body in their practice. Performance installations activated materials such as instruments, costumes, chalkboards and school chairs,
newspaper, nylon, and iPads. While many of these materials are highly charged traces of earlier performances, many of the materials were provided by the artists themselves and do not exist in archives and therefore have not been preserved and attended to in rich ways culturally significant materials are in traditional archives.

2.1.1 The Catalogue

Blockbuster exhibitions like RP are typically accompanied by a catalogue produced by the originating museum and curator. When an exhibition tours, the catalogue is available for purchase at the museum’s gift shop; it stands in for the exhibition after the show is over and adds to the resource material available at the museum. In “Exhibition Catalogues in the Globalization of Art. A Source for Social and Spatial Art History”44 Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Marcel Olivier. Olivier describe catalogues as having 3 types of historical information: factual, discursive, and relational. Factual information includes lists of documentary value, lists of artworks, participants, artists, and so forth. Discursive information is the ideological perspective the author (typically the exhibition’s curator(s) and other relevant experts) communicates to the viewer, reader, and art market. The relational information communicates how these works fit into the political, aesthetic, and cultural markets. However, the organizers and affiliates of RP produced various types of different supplementary material beyond the traditional catalogue, which in turn challenged the function, design, and integrity of the catalogue as evidence and document of the exhibition.

The catalogue for RP was published in 2013 by Valerie Cassel Oliver and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in print and digital formats and funded by a grant from The Brown

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Foundation. It was available for purchase at the exhibition, but it quickly sold out and went out of print, making the digital version primary and publicly available through the www.ISSUU.com platform. The catalogue includes a forward, acknowledgements, a preface, six essays, descriptions and images of works, artists’ biographies, a selected bibliography, and a chronology of Black performance art since 1960. The works included in the show largely consisted of digital art with some physical objects including photographic slides, paper materials, instruments, costumes, and mixed media installations. The catalogue also includes a section on the performance art pieces, but only the ones presented in Houston. These performances activated the “works” in the exhibition and their inclusion in the catalog suggests that one has access to only a partial experience. It is important to note that each institution’s iteration of RP was organized internally by the institution’s curators and museum staff. Therefore, while the exhibition appeared in each city, each presentation offered a different approach to the material and relied on different resources, spaces, artists, and scholars. By keeping the work in relation to the body, even when the body is absent, the RP catalogue exposes its inability to function as the official record of materials and events, and the futility of attempting to represent, in book format, the exhibition as a historical moment.

Researchers and scholars associated with the New York leg of the tour promoted and supported the exhibition by publishing a Tumblr page and website. Studio Museum’s Communications Coordinator Jamillah James and Curatorial Fellow Monique Long created the website, www.radicalpresenceny.org along with web designer, William B. Marshall. This website presented the artists together with brief biographies, portraits, and descriptions of their work as well as a calendar of events, interviews with artists, archival footage and recordings of performances, and video of a roundtable discussion with scholars, artists, and behind the scenes
New York University’s Grey Art Gallery’s former Curatorial Assistant, Rebecca Lowery and interns Lindsey Ganter, Laura Clark, and Roxana Vosough designed and organized the Documenting Black Performance Art Tumblr page in conjunction with the Grey Art Gallery’s exhibition of RP in Manhattan. The Tumblr featured archival material from New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections to provide background and contextual information for artists represented in the collection including Papo Colo, RodForce (Sherman Fleming), David Hammons, Adrian Piper, William Pope.L, Rammellzee, Sur Rodney (Sur), Dread Scott, and Daniel Tisdale. Since its founding in 1994, archivists for The Downtown Collection at the Fales Library and Special Collections have pursued the preservation of cultural expression in contemporary art and activism, primarily in music and off-off-Broadway theatre. Although this collection has been actively seeking materials for over 25 years, less than 25% of the RP artists are represented. Combined with the fact that 78% of the work in the exhibition was provided directly by the artists, it becomes clear that the majority of contemporary Black performance artists are largely invisible within primary research institutions.

RP offers a model for conceptualizing an alternate canon of art production because the work does not fit neatly into standard art categories. Black performance art, like Black production culture, does not have fidelity to the image, troubles truth, and challenges aesthetics. In other words, this material directly engages and confronts the violence within visual and scopic regimes of our contemporary culture and therefore offers a site to approach alternate or insurgent histories.

2.1.2 The art – works and performances

Whether it references, meditates upon, or performs, the work in Radical Presence engages
the archive by tracing acts of resistance in the everyday and the spectacular. For example, in *Derrick Adams’ Communicating with Shadows photographic series*, Adams performs in front of a projected image taken from iconic documentary photographs of artists David Hammons, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Senga Nengudi, and Adrian Piper. For RP, Cassel-Oliver selects *I Crush a Lot* (numbers 1, 3, and 4) which references David Hammons’ 1983 street performance (see image). The image is a still silhouette, a reduction or distillation taken from a photograph, which captured Hammons performance in Cooper Square in New York City. Photographer Dawoud Bey called it, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, and it became the iconic photograph Bey made of Hammons selling snowballs during a New York winter. The snowballs were perfectly round and neatly arranged according to size on a North African rug. The image Adams uses is one of a series taken by Bey showing Hammons in different states of address, including interacting with patrons and curious passerbys, resting, and working amongst other peddlers.

While little is known about Hammons’ actual intentions and stories that have been reported vary, according to Elena Filipovic’s book-length project published in 2016 on the work, Hammon’s was a well-known artist in 1983. He was featured in the extensively covered and reviewed 1980 MOMA P.S.1, *Afro-American Abstraction* exhibition along with Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Martin Puryear, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, and curated by April Kingsley.

The photographs included in the RP exhibition were taken in 2011 as part of programming designed by Yona Backer and Third Streaming, an arts consultancy and strategic services firm. In these photos, Adams is seen before a wall that casts two shadows, his own and the enlarged silhouette of Hammons. As Adams performs in front of the white wall, his shadow engages with Hammons’ creating a dialogue and destabilizing the audience’s sense of time and
space. Adams’ employment of Hammons, who is best known to the art world for his “refusal to participate in its rites and rules” 45, pushes Hammons radical politics indoors and in the middle of a 2011 discourse on contemporary art and allows Cassel Oliver to illustrate how artists are keeping resistant practices front and center nearly 30 years later.

Oliver’s selection of Coco Fusco’s experimental film a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert illustrates the multiple forms of trace working at the center of Black performance and production. Fusco, filmmaker, scholar, and activist, uses interrogates visual culture through performance, video art, interactive exhibitions, and writing. In this piece, she meditates on how racial fantasies influenced the use of photographic imagery in the investigation of and search for Angela Davis in connection to a 1970 shooting in San Raphael, California. She argued that photography was responsible for “generating and circulating racial stereotypes during the FBI hunt for and trial of Angela Davis” 46. This film shows how trace is used as a strategy in research, filmmaking, government investigations, activism and at the same time produces highly employed, but unreliable traces in our racially informed social climate.

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Figure 1 Photograph of David Hammons outside Cooper Square, New York. by photographer, Dawoud Bey. 1983.

Figure 2 Photograph of Derrick Adams performing I Crush A lot : David Hammons at Studio Museum. 2012
The 31-minute, black and white, experimental documentary film combined archival footage, simulated footage, stock footage, trial transcripts and memorabilia. It was provided courtesy of Video Data Bank, Chicago and presented on a monitor in the gallery space. First, Fusco describes how eBay and people outside government-funded collecting agencies and archives became her primary sources of archival material. Tracing this material back to these vigilante collectors inspired the narrative of the film.

Second, Fusco shows how FBI agents relied on a photograph, more specifically, a visual trace to identify Angela Davis which led to thousands of women being wrongly identified, arrested, and accused for being Angela Davis by FBI agents. She claims that racism embedded in the nation’s conscious provoked the hysteria around seeing, finding, and capturing the afro-wearing, educated, Black woman with guns and on the loose. Some women wore afros as political statements, while others done so in support of Davis, and yet others because it was fashionable, however while some used this to symbolize who she was not, policing entities relied on this very visual element to identify criminality and who Davis was.

According to a description on her website, Fusco was inspired by Allan Sekula’s “The Body and the Archive” and aimed to expose racism in archival logic. Sekula describes a shadow archive that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain” and that “contains both the traces of the visible bodies of heroes, leaders, moral exemplars, celebrities, and those of the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal, the nonwhite, the female, and all other embodiments of the unworthy”. Essentially, photography produces an archive and our racist imaginations gives meaning to what we see and therefore, what those images represent. In this project, she “highlights the ways that racialised fantasies about Davis and about black radicals in general in the 1960s and 70s interfered with a ‘scientific’ or
‘objective’ use of the photographic image by American law enforcement agencies”47.

Of all the pieces in Radical Presence, Tameka Norris’s Untitled performance and its associated images perhaps best visually represents the idea of trace. In this piece, Norris literally traces the limits of the gallery space by running her tongue along the gallery wall. In the Radical Presence online catalogue, it describes the work as “disrupting the notion of a pristine institutional space, implying the presence of a body and its experience of violence and pain.

Untitled builds on a long legacy of women performance artists, recalling important works such as Ana Mendieta’s Body Tracks (1974), a performance, documented as a wall-drawing, in which Mendieta dragged her blood-covered arms and fingers down a wall. Norris performed Untitled in an orange jumpsuit, an important detail that offers a second visual reference, this time to the prison system and criminal (in)justice. These layered references offer the audience an opportunity to ponder how Black women’s labor and oppression figure into the history of art and exhibition production. This project, like others in Radical Presence, illustrates how trace

underscores the legacy of racial trauma by foregrounding the body.

Just as the Radical Presence exhibition traced a culture that is ever-present but often erased or overlooked, Tyler Perry Studio’s publicly disclosed deep texts foreground the history of Black performance practice that has always been present in media history but has frequently been relegated to the sidelines. In these texts, TPS operates similarly to the art exhibit: each attempts to identify the bodies that have always been there but have been dismissed by capitalism and structures of inequality.

2.2 Trace and TPS

One of an archives’ main functions is to create access to historical material through standardized methods of naming, describing, organizing and preserving. TPS creates access to Black cultural material through the production of media by tracing Black lived experiences, the histories of Black artists unrecognized by the canon, and offering commentary on mainstream media culture. TPS does not have a formal archive or engage in preservation practices common among other media companies; however, as I show in the next sections, TPS preserves and makes Black cultural materials accessible through its productions and the creation of publicly-disclosed deep texts. Like Oliver did with Radical Presence, Perry traces and therefore establishes a radical archive, a shadow image of Black creative work through the presentation and production of Black performance.

Since RP was the first survey of contemporary Black performance art, Oliver relied heavily on the artists not only as art historians who trace performances as archival material, but also as spaces of memory. As described above, Derrick Adams traces David Hammons, who traces street peddlers and performers; Coco Fusco traces Angela Davis, who traces racist police practices; and Tameka Norris literally traces the gallery, which traces a history of exclusion.
Though many of the artists doubled as curatorial agents in this exhibition, Clifford Owens did triple-duty as artist, curator, and scholar. For RP, Owens contributed images and reproduced performances he presented as part of an exhibition at MOMA PS1, called *Anthology*. In *Anthology*, Owens critically engaged the historical erasure of Black performance art by “generating a living document that would inhabit the physical space of the museum.”

His performances acted as memorials for performances that never actually took place from many of the same influential Black artists featured in RP: Benjamin Patterson, Terry Adkins, Pope.L, Coco Fusco, Senga Nengudi, Coco Fusco, Lyle Ashton Harris, Lorraine O’Grady, Glenn Ligon, Derrick Adams, and Jacolby Satterwhite. As I will show below, Perry, like Owens, traces the history of Black performance through an act of commemoration in the dedication of his soundstages.

Using parody posters as marketing and promotional material, Perry uses stereotypical and highly mediated images to comment on and participate in popular culture. Like Jayson Musson performing as his own fictional character, Perry uses Madea as medium. The elderly Black female persona pushes her viewers to reconsider their positions by speaking and behaving in uninhibited, discordant ways. Oliver’s insightful inclusion of Musson’s work highlights an underexamined area in Black discourse, making way for Perry, but also for Andre Brock Jr.’s 2020 work on digital blackness and Black cybercultures. Brock, along with Musson and Oliver, contextualize, identify, and name the critical and rhetorical strategies Perry employs in his work.

The catalogue of TPS productions is dispersed across different forms of media, making

its official record more difficult to locate than RP’s. The TPS website does not include information about its media products, only about the studio’s grounds and soundstages. This information targets production companies interested in leasing space from TPS, forcing us to look elsewhere for source material and information. In this section, I examine Tyler Perry’s personal website, www.tylerperry.com, DVDs, and Tyler Perry’s 25 years in television and filmmaking as publicly disclosed deep texts.

2.3 Soundstages as Commemorative Spaces

The soundstages are one example of how Tyler Perry Studios uses trace to recognize pioneers of the Black theatrical tradition. At his original Greenbriar Studio, Perry named soundstages after historical figures like the film director Oscar Micheaux and the actor Sidney Poitier. Today, Oscar Micheaux’s name does not appear on any of the soundstages at Perry’s current studio campus in Fort McPherson, but other important agents of Black theatrical success are celebrated. Below are the names of the stages in the order they appear on the lot and in descending square footage.
Eight actors out of the fourteen have backgrounds in theatre: Whoopi Goldberg, Diahann Carroll, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Della Reese, and Denzel Washington. Although square footage, rather than the namesakes’ accomplishments, dictate what happens in each of these spaces, the soundstage names do influence the people working inside these spaces. In an article that interviewed some members of the cast *For Colored Girls*, actress Kerry Washington talked about the meaning and experience of working in these spaces:

“When we go work in our studios in L.A., you shoot in the Greta Garbo theatre and Charlie Chaplin stage, and you’re very grateful to be a part of that show [Tyler’s] studio, and you’re working on the Sidney Poitier stage in the Ruby Dee & Ossie Davis stage, and you realize the immense power that’s been cultivated by him. What he’s created was so beautiful in that we can actually own our stories and present them to the world in a place that comes from us. It’s such an honor. 49”

Washington is an accomplished actress and by 2010 had starred in a quite a few feature films including *Lakeview Terrace* (Neil Labute, 2008), *Miracle at St. Anna* (Spike Lee, 2008),


49 Clark, Dove. “For Colored Girls Full Cast Interview! Tyler Perry, Janet Jackson, Anika Noni Rose and More!” http://xappeal.net/the-fame/for-colored-girls-full-cast-interview/ Xappeal article., October 26, 2010,
Fantastic 4 (Tim Story, 2007), I Think I Love My Wife (Chris Rock, 2007), The Last King of Scotland (Kevin MacDonald, 2006), and Ray (Taylord Hackford, 2004). Given her work history, Washington would have visited many studios and soundstages before going to work at TPS, yet the soundstages named after American Americans affected her profoundly. Her observations highlight the tradition of naming studio spaces and expose the historical absence and exclusion of Blacks and African Americans in most Hollywood studios. TPS’ soundstages expand and enrich media history by highlighting the achievements of Black artists, which, in turn, expands and enriches the experiences of cast, crew, and fans.

In Matthew Freeman’s essay about Warner Bros. Studio tours, he describes visiting the studio as “reliving the magic through the eyes of filmmakers” and “going through the looking glass.” Freeman describes how Warner Bros. uses the studio’s spaces to provide fans an immersive experience that affirm fandom and taste cultures. Although media destinations like these are commonly seen as places of leisure and tourist activity, Alfred Martin points out that for Black audiences living within systemic structures of white supremacy, engaging with media in this way is less about leisure and more about activism. Martin says that Black audiences and artists use “the culture industries (money) to fight for (political) visibility.” Washington’s reaction to TPS’ memorial soundstages reflects this formulation: the soundstages produce an immersive experience for Washington that connects her to a lineage of Black media production that highlights and validates black (in)visibility.

Perry’s decision to name these spaces after highly acclaimed Black actors and directors reflects his desire to participate in and engage with the Hollywood model, but it also foregrounds

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Perry’s relation to the industry as rare, exterior, and Black. Erin Hill describes this way of mapping space as, political, historical, and ideologically loaded. She says,

“Mapping has commonly documented historical change through the eyes of that change’s chief architects: political leaders, military generals, and other major historical figures or ‘great men.’ Maps (of geographic space, production hierarchy, and workflow) also played an important role in the scientific reorganization of labor practices after the industrial revolution, and they were much beloved by early studio managers, who used them to represent their own histories.”52

Hill’s analysis chronicles how women have been isolated and excluded from mainstream media production; she also reveals how studio managers use space to assert their personal, professional, and political goals. At TPS, the dedication of rentable soundstages forces the industry to recognize Black achievement and success by making the people using his spaces recognize, name, and refer to artists who have inspired Perry.

As Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy argue in Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age, “the politics of media images and economies are not separate from the politics of space.”53 The essays in this volume discuss how space can enable a sense of belonging and alienation simultaneously, which speaks to how Black production cultures insulate and celebrate Blackness, but also expose and separate.

2.4 Parody Posters as marketing and branding

Starting in 2011, TPS has produced parody posters as promotional material for its theatrical releases. These posters visually reference well-known classic and popular movies and television shows. Though the posters are humorous and evoke feelings of nostalgia and familiarity, they also not-so-subtle lambaste mainstream Hollywood. This strategy of visual

53 Couldry, Nick, and Anna McCarthy. Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age. . 2004. pg 2
culture mining and satirical representation are well-established strategies of Black resistance. However, as Gates reveals, it is not uncommon for these objects to be read as inferior forms of communication due to Eurocentric bias. Gates’ essay “The Signifying Monkey” resolves this entanglement by explaining how these forms reference and represent, as well as connote and denote truth and understanding through processes of encoding.\(^{54}\) Perry’s parody posters for *Madea’s Big Happy Family* and *Boo! A Madea Halloween* are clear examples of how Black resistance uses in white media culture to speak out against historic erasure and absence.

### 2.4.1 Madea’s Big Happy Family as parody of The Brady Bunch

*The Brady Bunch*, a television show about a blended white family, originally aired on ABC from 1969 – 1974. Though popular when initially aired, the show’s popularity peaked during its syndication. The show dealt humorously with various family issues and became a mainstay in mainstream US popular culture. Despite Black people rarely being featured on the show, it was still a hit across racial lines and within African American households.

Mimi Marinucci describes *The Brady Bunch*’s popularity as tied to Generation X’s political beliefs, feminism, positions on sexuality and gender, and sense of humor. Although *The Brady Bunch* presented wholesome family values, Marinucci describes its reception as “kitsch” for Generation X,\(^{55}\) which is precisely Tyler Perry’s demographic. In other words, *The Brady Bunch* wasn’t successful because it accurately depicted the American family, it was successful because Generation X thought it was funny and absurd in its portrayals of American ideals. On its surface, the show portrays the Bradys as the perfect American family: a mom and dad, 3 boys

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Figure 4. Screengrab from opening of The Brady Bunch. 1969-1974.

Figure 5. Parody poster for Madea’s Big Happy Family. 2011
and 3 girls. But the audience is fully aware that the family has a more complex makeup: a divorcee, a widower, single parents, stepchildren, and an absent father.

This complexity—lurking-beneath-the-surface—is perfect for the TPS because the branding for *Madea’s Big Happy Family* seeks to invoke ideas of the All-American Family. At the same time, audiences familiar with *The Brady Bunch* will intuit that the film, like the TV show, must present a complicated picture of family life.

In 2011, Tyler Perry released *The Brady Bunch* parody poster to publicize the imminent release of *Madea’s Big Happy Family*. The movie poster mimics the TV show’s familiar grid aesthetic, which was presented both in advertising for the show and in the show’s opening sequence. *The Brady Bunch* image shows four females and four males; the mother, at top center, is positioned directly opposite the father in the bottom center, with their respective children flanking them along the left and right sides of the grid. In the show’s opening credits, each of the characters moves and looks around at the other family members, as if they can see each other across the black grid lines.

The *Madea’s Big Happy Family* poster recycles the familiar grid aesthetic but expands it to include all 15 principle cast members. Echoing the TV show’s opening sequence, the poster suggests movement within the static image. Tyler Perry, in character as Madea, toothily grins from the center of the grid, right below the title text; her hands, held in a gesture of welcome, overlap the boundaries of the frame she inhabits, much like the title text. All of the other characters carry facial expressions, some of which seem to react to the family’s outspoken matriarch others who use the space to present their own character identities. Lauren London, for example, seen in the third column, second row, has her back towards Madea, while Loretta Devine (third column, fourth row) gives Madea a skeptical, side-eye glance. The Manns, a real-
life couple who play a father-daughter duo in the second column, second row, appear to be happy and confused, respectively and in line with the character they play in many TPS productions. Cassi Davis featured in the first column, fifth row, and Teyana Taylor in the third column, first row, seem to mirror each other from different ends of the generational spectrum.

By referencing The Brady Bunch, the poster represents what Blackness means in the context of the mediated American family. Replacing the Bradys with Madea’s family clashes with popular notions of what families look like, and thus deconstructs the audience’s mental image of the nuclear family as white perfection. The poster pays homage to The Brady Bunch as popular television fare aligned with wholesome TPS content, but it also comments on the complexities of representation.

2.4.2 The Real Black Swan as parody poster of Black Swan

Figure 6 Black Swan film poster. 2010
In *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010) Natalie Portman plays the lead role and is the subject of the promotional poster. Staring directly at the camera, her face is expressionless, yet is haunting and intense. Set against a white background that fades into blinding white make-up, the actress seems to hide something sinister behind the white powder, blood-red lipstick and dark eye makeup. Her neck and clavicle illustrate her humanity and strength, while her crown, which appears to be an assemblage of silver bits of junk, hints at otherworldliness. This independent film grossed an estimated $13 million and earned awards from the Venice and Toronto film festivals, along with a host of others. In other words, *Black Swan* was a success and is well-known in popular culture.

Tyler Perry’s took on *Black Swan* in another promotional poster for *Madea’s Big Happy Family*. Perry’s version is aesthetically identical to the Aronofsky poster, with one notable exception: instead of Natalie Portman’s ethereal whiteness staring out at viewers, we see the face
of Madea made up in the same stark makeup and wearing a beauty pageant-esque crown. The parody poster subverts our expectations; it is discordant with the original image. In Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*, the lead character seeks to achieve a new level of skill and recognition in ballet by pursuing the role of the black swan. This role is extremely demanding; it requires the fluid, light, innocence of an angelic creature as well as the harsh, threatening, presence of a dark spirit. Portman’s image portrays this duality, evoking something simultaneously devilish and divine; Perry’s Madea does something else.

The poster’s text, “Madea Is The Real Black Swan” traces Blackness as sinister materiality to Blackness as a state of being, but also positions Perry as a double for the white swan or mainstream Hollywood imagery. The sharp contrast between the dark and light features of Portman’s character portrayal (the white face make-up versus the dark eye makeup, for example) signals the film’s central premise: the ballerina’s internal struggle between good and evil. Her whiteness makes her darkness more menacing. Madea’s features, even covered in white makeup, are already understood as racially Black: her broad nose and thick lips are phenotypically black, despite the whitened skin. In this context, Madea’s ambivalent expression does not evoke spiritual evil, but criminality. Madea’s portrait seems more like a mugshot than a portrait of an emotionally embattled artist. The parody poster provokes us to think about how society condemns Black people as criminals for a nose or a pair of lips; it therefore functions as a call-out to the Black community, who are likely aware of how their facial features are perceived within a racist society.

These posters do not represent a scene or a moment in the film they promote. Rather, they are “a trace of a trace, not even a shadow”56 as Vijay Iyer says in conversation with Fred Moten

on Improvisation. They hint at the film’s themes and attract viewers by plumbing the audience’s pop cultural memory and evoking nostalgia for earlier films and shows. Yet the posters also disrupt the source material and use that disruption to counter racist beliefs and stereotypes.

2.4.3 The Exorsister as parody of The Exorcist

![The Exorcist poster](image1)

**Figure 8 The Exorcist poster. 1973**

![Parody poster for Boo! A Madea](image2)

**Figure 9 Parody poster for Boo! A Madea**
The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) is a film about two Catholic priests who attempt the exorcism of a young girl who has become demonically possessed. The film was wildly popular and won six awards from The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and The Golden Globes in 1974. By being recognized with the highest distinctions in filmmaking, the film quickly became regarded as a cult classic horror film. The film’s poster just as iconic, and features the figure of a single man on a neighborhood street rendered in stark black and white; the main source of illumination comes from harsh, eerie light shining out of a second-floor window. The chiaroscuro creates mystery and suspense by casting the majority of the image into shadow and focusing attention on the silhouetted man wearing a trench coat and a trilby hat and carrying a doctor’s bag. His presence denotes him as the titular subject of the film. Although the film touches on deeper subjects, like questioning God’s existence, the poster suggests a fairly straightforward, even trite, narrative: that the only person who can save the white girl (a hackneyed symbol of America’s purity and innocence) is a man—in this case, a man of God.

The content, themes and popularity of The Exorcist are concordant with the Tyler Perry brand, which promotes Christianity, family, and community. In an almost identical poster, the figure of Tyler Perry’s Madea replaces that of the silhouetted man; in this film, we are to understand, the agent of redemption is Madea. This poster, The Exorsister, was designed to promote Boo! A Madea Halloween, a comedy horror film that satirizes the horror genre with no specific interest in The Exorcist brand. We know from earlier TPS’s Madea productions that the grandmother we see silhouetted in the center of the image is a gun-toting, Bible misquoting, larger-than-life woman who resolves social and community issues through force, without regard to authoritative structures.

Using The Exorcist as its source material allows the poster to accomplish two objectives:
first, by referencing such a classic horror film, it clearly demarcates Boo! as a riff on that genre. The second objective, however, is a rather subtle signal to Perry’s fan base, many of whom are practicing Christians. The religious aspect of The Exorcist, as filtered through the poster’s parody of it, appeals to the TPS audience because it replaces the Catholic priest with Madea as the primary spiritual authority. The poster also replaces the “girl” as the sole person who needs help with an entire “family” who needs help that only Madea, the religious and familial authority in the Black community, can provide.

TPS parody posters reveal how media themes align with Perry’s values by using signifying practices. All these parody posters reflect family values in different ways. By using The Brady Bunch opening sequence, he traces a line from the popular and idealized image of the American family to the Black American family experience. The poster not only appropriates the visual elements of Brady Bunch aesthetics, but the content of the story also has to do with family relations, unlike the other two parody posters. The Black Swan parody poster, which also publicized Madea’s Big Happy Family, was used solely for marketing and promotional purposes because of Black Swan’s popularity. TPS plays with the image and title of the film to draw attention to the dissonance between American culture and Black American culture. Black Swan, a psychological thriller about a white girl and her ballerina struggles, is the perfect site to consider how the canon places limits on who can occupy protagonist roles and what it would look like if someone else less white, like Madea, stepped into the spotlight. Lastly, The Exorsister parody poster plays with religious themes and the horror genre, as illustrated in the title of Perry’s film and the space Madea occupies. These publicly-disclosed deep texts offer the public insight to the Tyler Perry Studios brand while also tracing alternate Black experiences inside and outside of the frame.
2.5 TPS Catalogue Raissone

The catalogue of TPS productions is dispersed across different media types, making an official record difficult to locate. As discussed earlier, the Tyler Perry Studios website does not include information about media products, but only about the grounds of the studio and soundstages for production companies interested in leasing space, forcing us to look elsewhere for source material and information. In this section, I examine Tyler Perry’s personal website, www.tylerperry.com, as a publicly-disclosed deep text and a type of catalogue raisonne for the stageplays that traces its lineage back to Black theatre, and more specifically, the Chitlin’ Circuit. Since most TPS screen productions are adaptations or spin-offs of the stageplays, I start with the stageplays as the backbone of the other productions and aesthetic foundation of the company.

2.5.1 The Website

Tyler Perry’s website, www.TylerPerry.com features news and updates, catalogs his productions and awards, contains editorials and provides an “archive” page. Like the studios’ soundstages and parody posters, the website is a publicly-disclosed deep text that offers insight on the inner workings of the studio while tracing an alternate history of filmmaking and television production practices. On the site’s homepage, there is a link to an “archive” page, which lists all of Perry’s productions, which are represented by a title and promotional. This page is the first object I will examine as a trace that documents the company’s official history.

As mentioned in the section on the Radical Presence catalogue, we understand the catalogue contains three types of historical information: factual, discourse, and relational. As Joyeux-Prunel and Marcel have discussed, it is unwise to rely on catalogues for complete accuracy because the catalogue can’t always reflect exactly what was included in each iteration of the
exhibition. However, it remains true that the catalogue is a standardized way of sharing
information steeped in archival and historical logic and information. While TPS’s
improvisational approach creates gaps in the historical record, it also makes space for the
preservation of alternate histories.

Other Circuit playwrights/directors, David E. Talbert and Shelly Garrett (now deceased)
also present their work as their own creative projects, rather than projects of a production
company. On the website for Talbert, www.davidgetalbert.com, media are separated by type:
film, theatre, and literature. By clicking on the link, you are taken to a page listing the
corresponding media. Each production appears in a singular column with a snapshot of the
production beside a short description and list of cast members. On Garrett’s page, the
productions are described as DVDs and link to a page where you can find additional information.
This suggests a standardization in organizing information for public consumption distinct from
mainstream industry standards.

Comparing Tyler Perry’s website to that of top American director Steven Spielberg, we
see a difference in how productions are organized and how information is presented. Amblin
Entertainment, a production company Spielberg started in 1983 and was designed to continue the
legacy of Spielberg’s creative work. Clicking on Spielberg’s name in the dropdown menu leads
to a chronological history of Spielberg’s life, while the About section consists of details about
Amblin’s corporate hierarchy.

Spielberg’s productions are separated into two categories: movies and television. Each
production is represented by its title and a promotional image. Clicking on an image leads to a
profile page that provides additional information on the corresponding production. Metadata is

consistent across all profiles; details such as release dates, awards, story, above the line crew, and streaming availability are standard on each page. In addition, many pages include clips, reviews, set photography and related content.

Like Talbert and Garrett, a full catalogue of Tyler Perry Studio’s productions do not appear on the studio’s website, www.tylerperrystudios.com, but rather on Tyler Perry’s personal website, www.TylerPerry.com. By selecting films, television, or stage plays users can filter the list of productions, which are displayed in a grid layout; clicking on an image leads to a production’s information. The grid does not show dates of production or release but is roughly organized chronologically with the most recent releases appearing first, in the top left corner, and the earliest appearing in the bottom right corner. The arrangement of images and the productions they reference offers insight into how the productions fit into a linear timeline, although this linearity does not accurately reflect how work is organized (along space and time) at TPS. The production slate usually involves a touring stageplay, as well as the production of a sitcom, a drama, and sometimes a feature. Therefore, the release of the stageplay DVD and thus its position on the timeline is inaccurate in relation to the production of the other media. The stage plays, DVDs, films, and television shows are all unique representations of what happens within Tyler Perry Studios. Because the recorded stage plays are most similar to what the company started producing in its early days and has continued up until the 2019 production of *Madea’s Farewell Play Tour*, the stage plays contain many of the traces of the company’s history.

On the website, the title of each production links to a page that offers more information. However, unlike the uniformity across pages I observed on Spielberg’s website, each TPS production’s page is contains different bits of metadata: brief descriptions, complete listings of a production’s stars, video clips, a touring schedule of where the play was presented, and
sometimes streaming availability. Looking at these pages as traces of Perry’s artistic record, we understand that each production represents different aspects of his history, radicalizing preservation, but we also notice that more recent productions include more information than earlier ones, indicating an emerging impulse to preserve and share details about his oeuvre.

Figure 10 Screengrab of stage plays page on www.Tylerperry.com website.

For example, on the profile page for I Know I’ve been Changed, Perry’s first stage play, there is are two images: one of the souvenir booklet’s front cover and one of the play’s program. There is also a short summary of the play, a note that Mr. Perry originally played the character “Joe,” and a reference to the Washington Post’s favorable review. A brief production history explains that this play toured from 1998 to 2000. Although DVD recordings of Perry’s other
stage plays can be found on Amazon and eBay, and many now stream online, a copy of this stage play does not appear to be available anywhere.

*A Madea Christmas*’ production profile page is the first to include a recorded clip on the website. This clip shows the cast on stage with Mr. Perry, as Madea, addressing an actor about his lines. This 3:34 clip reveals little about the production’s history, but tells us a lot about stage dynamics in a TPS production, how the audience engages with the material, the centrality of the body in the work, how improvisation informs the experience, and how these elements trace an alternate history of production and relationship between TPS and their audience.

In the voice of Madea, and in the midst of the story, Mr. Perry informs his fellow actor of a change made during rehearsal that the actor failed to deliver. Over three attempts, the actors, audience, and Mr. Perry all laugh hysterically. Madea even explains why the change was made, saying “that don’t make no sense” based on events unfolding in the story. The corresponding text on the webpage includes only a short summary of the play. The actor is not identified by name or character and there is no explanation as to how the clip connects to the play.

This clip illustrates what Owens describes in his work *Anthology*, which appeared in the *Radical Presence* exhibition. In Black production culture the audience, the body, and the space all share in the act of creation. Owens says,

“My body is attached to Anthology. It is the container and conveyor of its meaning. It functions as kind of liminal body. Through photography and video, the texts are made both implicit and explicit as a representation of a past moment that occurred in the presence of an audience, and in relation to the camera itself. The presence of and engagement with the audience in the live performances was critical to this project. Audience members kissed me, kicked me, slapped me, embraced me, dragged me, hoisted me, humiliated me, humbled me, befriended me…”

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Like Owens, Perry uses his body to act, direct, write, produce, instruct, permit, choreograph—all in the moment, which engages the audience as participants in creating that moment.

According to the web page for *A Madea Christmas*, a DVD was produced after the play’s theatrical run, prior to Perry’s next stage play, *Aunt Bam’s Place*, and before the play *Madea Gets a Job*. Though the touring schedule is not given, we understand that the DVD was produced at a time when TPS was producing film, television, and plays. In the company’s early days, it solely produced plays; eventually, in 2005, it began producing films with *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. Television followed the year after, with House of Payne premiering in 2006. In recent years, TPS has produced mostly television and films.

TPS positions all of its productions as Perry’s oeuvre: they are cataloged on the Tyler Perry website, not on the Tyler Perry Studios website. Although this choice seems atypical, since Perry didn’t directly create all of the films and TV shows listed under his “umbrella,” it is common practice among Chitlin’ Circuit playwrights and directors. The websites for two other Chitlin’ Circuit creatives, David E. Talbert and Shelly Garrett (now deceased), also present their stage plays as their own creative projects, rather than projects of a production company. So, although Perry’s website reflects common Chitlin’ Circuit practices, I argue that Perry’s website reflects how improvisational practices create radical forms of preservation.

TPS refuses to allow mainstream Hollywood production standards to overtake its own production practices. The studio has developed alternate ways of working, as well as its own methods for preserving and sharing knowledge, that are improvisational in nature. Aligned with the natural processes and flows of Black communities, improvisational production cultures are a form of resistance, though they require a radical politics in order to be rendered legible. By prioritizing process over product and knowing over knowledge, improvisational production
culture identifies gaps in the historical record which become opportunities for black
performance.

2.6 Conclusion

Tyler Perry’s career began in Atlanta, Georgia with his stage plays. Perry and his
company toured around the North and Southeast of the US along a route he described as the
“Chitlin’ Circuit.” Although the Chitlin’ Circuit has been described as a collection of venues that
hosted Black acts during a time when many performance venues would only host white acts, the
tradition persists within Perry’s other work; the studio traces it in its production practices.

Although Perry promotes the idea of using venues and routes affiliated with the Chitlin’
Circuit, he does not disclose the entire tour schedule until after his last show ends; this quasi-
secrecy reflects the improvisational and discordant nature of Black production culture. At the end
of each show, Perry typically appeared and addressed the audience. This appears at during the
curtain call of the live event and at the end of the DVD recordings. His remarks included an
announcement of the city in which this version of the play was performed and a reminder that the
production would available on DVD. These appearances are the only instance in which Perry
disclosed locations/sites, so the DVDs represent a form of cultural traffic as well as a production
history; they are also useful objects of analysis for audience and reception studies.

_Madea’s Farewell Play Tour_ was the last touring stage play produced by Tyler Perry
Studios. According to Tyler Perry’s website the company presented 88 shows in 24 states
between January 18, 2019 and May 26, 2019. The number of shows presented in each state
varied, with the most performances presented at Philadelphia’s Metropolitan Opera House (5),

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Los Angeles’s Dolby Theatre (4), Chicago’s Arie Crown Theatre (4), Dallas’s Theatre at Grand Prairie\textsuperscript{60}, Detroit’s Fox Theatre (4), New York City’s Radio City Music Hall (4), and Atlanta’s Fox Theatre (4). Complete tour schedules for Perry’s plays are not typically available to the public or researcher; this production is an exception. The tour schedule for Madea’s *Farewell Play Tour* represents a contemporary Chitlin’ Circuit or “Black Circuit,” as Rashida Z. Shaw McMahon describes this form of Black theatre. Since part of the Chitlin’ Circuit’s success is targeting largely underserved Black markets, the tour is, as Perry suggests, an illustration of today’s Chitlin’ Circuit.

In an essay called “The Archival Effect” Jaimie Baron attempts to address the distinction between “archival” and “found” footage or documents as terms used amongst filmmakers and theorists in discourses of documentary filmmaking. For filmmakers, things that are considered archival are typically found in an archive; therefore, they possess some social, political, and/or historical value. Found footage, on the other hand, is old and rare but is found in places outside of an archive. However, Baron argues, an object’s archival value should not be based on where it has been found. She settles on using “foundness” as the basis for the designation of “archival” which represents an experience between the object and the viewer. Baron argues “that the archival document may now be better understood less as a reflection of where the particular document has been stored than as an experience of the viewer watching a film that includes or appropriates documents that appear to come from another text or context of use.”\textsuperscript{61} Reflecting on this argument, Perry’s tracing of his work via parody posters, website organization, and unique

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\textsuperscript{60} Currently Texas Trust CU Theatre

touring schedule and documentation become archival even though they do not exist in any archives. Looking at Black performances as archival material, I approach recordings, soundstages, and parody posters as traces of Black cultural material that are “bifocal”\textsuperscript{62} in nature, speaking to a Black audience and to a white context simultaneously.

Tyler Perry’s plays have been captured and reproduced in the form of widely popular bootleg DVDs that street vendors circulated in local Black communities starting in the early 2000s. Although Mr. Perry has strongly renounced the illegal dissemination of his work, the bootleg DVDs are largely responsible for the popularity of his and his studio’s work. With streaming replacing DVDs as the primary form of home entertainment, the bootlegs DVDs are now quite difficult to find, though I have found a few at thrift stores on the outskirts of Atlanta. Even though it is illegal to sell bootleg DVDs, these thrifts stores act as middlemen, working on consignment and selling goods on behalf of private sellers. I am interested in what these objects can tell us about the reproduction, popularity, and circulation of Perry’s stage plays; I am also interested in the sellers as collectors of these materials.

Even the pirating of Perry’s work via DVD can be seen as an archive-worthy addition because of how these illegal practices compensate for gaps in mainstream distribution. Although Perry’s stage plays were once distributed via DVD, ordered over the phone or website, the studio and Lionsgate Home Entertainment have phased out this form of dissemination. Some of Tyler Perry Studios’ film and televisions productions are still available through partnerships with BET+, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Lionsgate, but streaming offerings are limited to only a few titles. Given the lack of streaming availability for many Perry productions, bootleg DVDs sourced from local thrift stores fit neatly within Baron’s definition of “archival”; although they

are not part of a formal, institutional archive, they stand as final testaments, documenting productions that either happened in the past (stage plays) or have disappeared from the present (TV and film).

As I argue in this dissertation, Tyler Perry Studio’s film, television, and recorded stage play productions are adaptations and extensions of the live improvisational theatre productions and everyday Black performance. I understand the new media forms that have emerged since the stage play are tied to efforts of financial gain, but I suggest that these new formats also preserve Black cultural material. Similar to the way Valerie Cassel Oliver traces contemporary practices of Black performance through objects, spaces, and rituals in Radical Presence Perry uses soundstages, parody posters, his website and his touring stage plays to trace a history of Black production culture that parallels mainstream production culture. In the next two chapters, I will expose discordances in the production culture that reflect an improvisational way of producing film and television content.
PRESENTING RESISTANCE: BLACK PRODUCTION CULTURE IS DISCORDANT

In *Distributed Blackness*, Andre Brock Jr. conceptualizes Blackness online as an identity that emerges “without relying on an essential quality of blackness or on the materiality of Black phenotypical qualities.” Brock traces how online practices such as “signifying” and “ratchetry” produce Black digital identity on platforms that are largely anonymous. Similarly, I argue that Black production practices such as discordance reflect Black popular culture and Black identity.

This chapter is divided into two sections; first, I show how Tyler Perry Studios’ production practices are discordant with historical narratives; second, I show how industry-standard production practices create aesthetic discordance in TPS marketing and promotional material. I examine semi-embedded deep texts: material that is available to the public, but is most relevant to the industry professionals. Therefore, it conveys different meanings for the organization and players internal to the studio. This material shows how discordance is a feature of Black production culture, as well as a form of radical preservation.

Tyler Perry Studios is the only privately-owned multi-media production company and studio owned by an African American who has achieved a high level of financial success. It’s exceptional for a few other reasons, too: TPS is the only studio in which the owner also directs most of its productions; TPS is one of the largest studios in terms of acreage; TPS is the only studio to host the Democratic Convention; TPS is the only studio to occupy a former military base; TPS is the only production company to make historic deals with TBS, O Network, and BET+. Clearly TPS looms large as a site of Black cultural production, yet for all its unique

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attributes and notable achievements, the studio lacks a corporate archive similar to those found at older Hollywood studios.

However, being a Black media company also means that the company sells and defines a specific kind of Blackness that can be divisive and controversial. As Beretta E. Smith-Shomade explains in her book on BET, the challenge for Black media companies is that they make Blackness into their biggest commodity. After bell hooks, Shomade says that these companies must “mask their agendas” meaning that they must take extra steps to avoid appearing to be motivated by capitalism. Therefore the economic thrust becomes entangles with an ethos of self-determination and supporting Black business which creates visible and felt discordances in the product and the production. Given the requirements of capital, scholars like Smith-Shomade have shown the difficulties that Black owned media companies face when developing a marketable and stable brand that can also reflect the nuances and diversity of the Black community. Under capitalism, there is always a compromise and standardization which can be particularly problematic when a studio becomes as synonymous with Black identity as TPS has.

While TPS shares the burdens and limitations prescribed by capitalism that affect all studios, the TPS’ corporate culture produces very different production practices in each of its departments. Long-time industry professionals who come into TPS after having achieved a certain level of success in other companies often find it difficult to work in this environment; some describe their work as more logistical than creative, while others find it full of opportunities to do something truly special. In this section, I examine Tyler Perry’s newsfeed on his website; special features sections on his mass-produced DVDs of stage plays; and production documents to show how discordance features in Black production cultures.

64 Shomade, pg 28.
3.1 Discordance in The Black Radical Tradition

According to Cedric Robinson, the Black Radical Tradition is largely based on a reconsideration of official history and one’s place in relation to it. Leaning on DuBois’s argument that post-Civil War propaganda wrongly blamed Black people for the failures of Reconstruction, Robinson highlights how resistance shaped the political and economic decisions of the enslaved and dispossessed since and even before the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Cedric Robinson argues that Black radicalism is a form of resistance from a political economic perspective through a historiographical analysis of W.E.B. DuBois’s scholarship. While W.E.B. DuBois was a writer, editor, professor, social researcher, and public intellectual, Robinson describes him as “one of the finest historians ever developed in the United States.”65 DuBois’s Black Reconstruction in America presented a theory of history based on economic analysis and class struggle. He employed methods of historical analysis to reinterpret the period of Reconstruction and suggested that ideology, human motives, and social relations were the root cause for Reconstruction’s failure.

Just as Robinson looks to DuBois and finds an activist charting discordance in the historic record as a radical act, this chapter charts discordsances at TPS as “the Black studio.” This approach helps us understand how operating as corporate for-profit entity limits the depiction of Blackness across the media industries in a way that obscures the nuances and diversity of the Black experience as lived by the people who work in the studio. Tyler Perry Studios has served as the entry point to the film and television industry for many of its employees. However, in an industry that inherently offers very little in the way of work-life balance (fast-paced, cutthroat, stressful, long workdays), getting a job at TPS is still a very

65 Ibid, pg 185
competitive process. Tyler Perry Studio jobs are highly coveted jobs in the local Black community. As we will see in the next section, hiring practices and advancement have distinct practices from the industry. Ironically, this competitive environment is less tied to standard pressures within the media industry, but rather because of a discordance within the industry’s infrastructure that creates opportunities and obstacles for Black creative professionals.

3.2 Discordance at TPS

TPS’s hiring and advancement practices are discordant with standard media industry practices. Although nepotism is a common practice in Hollywood, giant media companies like Disney, Lionsgate, Warner Bros. all use their websites to promote career opportunities and to provide access to job applications and human resources departments. Tyler Perry Studios’ website, by contrast, does not publicly advertise employment opportunities or provide any pathways into the company. The website does imply a family-like company structure and shows how important personal relationships are to the company. By looking at Tyler Perry’s personal website newsfeed we can discern a company structure and promotional strategies.

Samantha Sheppard describes Tyler Perry as a “media platform,” emphasizing his strategic moves and positions in today’s media. A media platform has the capacity to elevate others’ work and is a “structuring operative within the contemporary American media landscape.”\(^{66}\) Since Perry first constructed TPS as a state-of-the-art production studio, he has used it to produce his own work and granted access to the studio’s technology, space, and equipment for other productions. With the well-equipped soundstages, land, and what Sheppard calls “black stream visibility,”\(^{67}\) a form of social capital engendered by his following, Perry

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\(^{66}\) Sheppard. pg. 11

\(^{67}\) Ibid pg. 12
creates resources for all kinds of content creators, but more specifically for Black media creatives.

Similarly, Tricia Rose describes rap and Hip Hop as entry points into production culture for Black creatives. Initially, music video production was overlooked as a lucrative aspect of artist development. Record companies were uninvolved in the creative process of music video production, which made space for Black creativity. However, once rap artists became more financially viable, record companies wanted more control over the image and content. They began excluding Black creatives. Like TPS’ productions, the music video’s popularity created more opportunities. Learning from Hip Hop’s example, however, the studio safeguards itself against losing those opportunities by incorporating complex networks and ways of working in order to protect the cultural material and the sources of creativity.

In addition to developing complex working methods, Tyler Perry controls the company’s narrative by keeping the its structure and organization opaque and inaccessible to the public. Herein lies the conundrum and what makes black production cultures discordant with mainstream media industries. Perry operates as a pathway to the media industries for Black creatives, yet that pathway is narrow, guarded and maintained by who person who dictates the company’s workings in alignment with his creative vision alone. Other media companies have narrow pathways too, but they are not dealing with a pathway that is pre-narrowed by being branded as Black. Charting the discordance of TPS allows us to understand how Black production cultures thrive as a different place for creatives to work while they limit the definition of Blackness.

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68 Rose, Black Noise
In a section on the mutually beneficial relationship between Tyler Perry’s and Oprah Winfrey’s companies and their business decisions around programming on OWN network, Sheppard says, “Catering to Black audiences, OWN’s use of narrowcasting is reminiscent of other new networks that target Black viewership, including FOX, WB, and UPN.” She argues that these networks nurtured a viewership of underrepresented Black audiences. When combined with Tyler Perry’s brand of Black entertainment, OWN was able to serve their targeted demographic of Black women with Tyler Perry’s Black female-centered content.

While other Chitlin Circuit playwrights achieved success by producing, promoting and slightly modifying one production, Tyler Perry has used the Chitlin Circuit to workshop his plays, produce continuity between plays, promote new work, and involve his core audience in popular culture discourse. In this next section, I describe how Perry uses what Sheppard calls, “Black Stream Visibility” via the way the studio is positioned in the industry across its hiring practices, narratives, and rituals.

3.3 Studio Website

Eileen Meehan’s “Media Empires: Corporate Structures and Lines of Control” exposes how a company’s holdings through horizontal and vertical integration reveals patterns characteristic to their production culture. By this yardstick, Perry’s lack of a clear corporate hierarchy is discordant with contemporary studio practices. TPS’s unique organizational structure reinforces Sheppard’s argument of Tyler Perry as a media platform. The logics of this discordant production culture are observable in the semi-embedded deep texts issued from the company.

In the last few years, Perry has used the newsfeed feature on his personal website to announce the hiring of new executive-level employees. In these short posts, he explains how his hiring decisions relate to the studio’s production schedule, reflects personal relationships; or aligns with his own work ethic. At Tyler Perry Studios, everyone from the President of the company to the production assistants are subservient to the momentum that is Mr. Perry.

Tyler Perry Studios is a company that has production and studio divisions; I analyze how TPS presents their organizational structure by comparing it to presentations from companies that have a similar structure. These companies are Warner Bros., Paramount, Disney, Universal Pictures & Studios, and Sony Pictures. While other Black-owned/Black-led production companies like Spike Lee’s 40 Acres and a Mule, Ava Duvernay’s Array Now, Jordan Peele’s Monkeypaw, and Issa Rae’s Hoorae have achieved success and influence comparable to Tyler Perry Studios, they lack the resources, production space, and corporate relationships that would enable them to act as media platforms and to support to other entities. Black production cultures are directly involved in making Black popular culture and rely on the Black vernacular traditions (i.e. oral storytelling, folktales, the dozens, signifying, call and response, improvisational practices, sermonizing etc.) to do so.

On the Warner Bros. website, the company’s organization is clearly laid out, with pages dedicated to its Operating Officers and Divisional Executives. These pages feature headshots and biographies for each leadership team member. Paramount, Disney, Universal, and Sony’s leadership pages are all formatted similarly. Each headshot links to another page that contains additional information about the executive. All headshots are generally high contrast, medium range portraits, and the biographies describe the person’s role and responsibilities, professional

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70 In 2015, Oprah Winfrey’s Harpo Productions & Studios located in Chicago, Illinois closed
background, personal background, and professional affiliations.\footnote{Warner Bros Website. https://www.warnerbros.com/company/leadership/divisional-executives#tom-ascheim}

Tyler Perry Studios does not have a leadership page on its corporate website. A blog-like newsfeed reports recent TPS activities on www.tylerperry.com, rather than on the www.tylerperrystudios.com website. The TPS website contains information about the studio’s spaces and resources for the purposes of attracting lucrative rental deals with other media producers. By keeping the company’s structure and organization vague and opaque, Perry keeps his brand focused on him, rather than on the studio he built.

3.4 Newsfeed and Company Structure as Semi-Embedded deep texts

3.4.1 Angi Bones as President of Original Content

On January 11, 2022, Angi Bones was announced as President of Original Content at TPS. Bones started with TPS in 2005 on the feature film Diary of a Mad Black Woman. From 2007 to 2011 she worked as a second assistant director on various Perry films such as Daddy’s Little Girls, Tyler Perry’s Why Did I Get Married, The Family that Preys, Madea Goes to Jail, and For Colored Girls. During that time, she also co-produced the television shows The Tyler Perry Show, Meet the Browns, and House of Payne before splitting with the company in 2011. After 2011, she worked for various other companies as a producer or co-producer on about twenty-three feature films and television shows, including the docu-series Rickey Smiley For Real, the feature film Meet the Blacks 2, and the made-for-TV movie Raising Izzie.

On his website, Tyler Perry writes about Bones’ hiring:

I’ve known Angi for 15 years and her expansive industry knowledge and working experience makes her the perfect fit for this newly created position at TPS. She has the insight to understand the everyday production needs in a challenging pandemic-ridden atmosphere, while understanding the real-world stories and people that become part of our stories. I’m
excited to include her in a seat at the table. I’m grateful to have Angi on board at TPS as we continue to build on an always-growing and expanding slate of both films and television."^72

In this announcement, Perry speaks for company, yet describes Bones’ hiring as a personal decision based on his personal relationship with her and his respect for her industry experience. What the announcement fails to mention is why this new position was created, what it means for the company, and what her professional responsibilities will be—all fairly standard pieces of information in mainstream studios’ new hire press releases and announcements.

Tyler Perry productions feature everyday people, conditions, and situations, so he looks for professionals whose work shares similar themes. Immediately following Bones’ departure from TPS in 2011, she began working on projects that helped shine a light on people living in the margins. She developed documentaries like *Season of Death: Chasing the American Dream* about migrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border; she co-wrote and directed *Letters to a Father*, a short film about a Black girl growing up fatherless; and *Raising Izzie*, a feature film about a Black teacher who helps two orphaned white sisters. According to Bones’ biography on her production company’s website, westendproductions.com, her goal is to give back creatively through film and television that communicates themes of family, faith, love and forgiveness.^73 When Perry’s states that “understanding real-world stories and people” is an asset to the company, he is signaling that Bones’ ethos matches his company’s goals: to represent overlooked individuals and communities. Perry’s promotion and public support of Bones reflects a shared sense of authenticity, family, and forgiveness as advocated by Bones and appreciated by Perry.

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3.4.2 Michelle Sneed as President of Production & Development

On August 16, 2018, Michelle Sneed was announced as the President of Production and Development on the tylerperry.com website’s newsfeed. The post introduces Sneed as an industry “veteran” and a former employee of the studios from 2009 to 2015. Once again, the position’s official professional responsibilities are not outlined, but a quote from Perry correlates her past work to his aim of telling the stories of the overlooked. He says:

  I’m incredibly excited to welcome Michelle back to the studio…. She has always been someone who embodies the values of TPS, from the diligent work she’s done in development and production execution to identifying and curating talent both in front of and behind the camera. Similar to how I’ve always operated in my film and television projects, during her career she has provided opportunities to those whose diverse experiences and stories are often overlooked and untold.74

In this announcement, Perry seems to be talking to an audience comprised of both his public and his studio’s workers. At TPS it is common for people for leave and return to the company later. It is understood that these workers inhabit personal and professional roles in relation to Perry. In Melvin Child’s tell-all book, Never Would Have Made it, he describes how Perry once introduced him to a theatre audience, during a curtain call, as Perry’s first promoter75. In his remarks, Perry takes a dig at Childs, which offends him and humiliates him because Childs had brought his son to the show. In reference to his company’s success, Perry says, somewhat gloatingly, “How do you like me now?” Childs explains his hurt feelings: he believed that his work and the sacrifices he made for Perry elevated him to the status of personal friend, not just a promoter75. Similarly, in the announcement for Sneed’s hiring, Perry comments his long

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75 Childs, Melvin. Never Would Have Made It. The Rise of Tyler Perry, the Most Powerful Entertainer in Black America (and What it Really Took to Get Him There). Touch 1 Media, LLC, 2011.
relationship with Sneed and how she aligns with his creative vision. He cites her ability to build connections with cast and crew in front of and behind camera as a desired trait for the president of his company. Perry’s comments define what it means to be a good executive at TPS. One should know how to build and maintain personal and professional relationships, be loyal to him, and pursue diverse stories.

3.4.3 Robert A. Boyd II as Chief Operating Officer

On November 11, 2021, it was announced that Robert A. Boyd II would “join TPS team as Chief Operating Officer.” The text beneath a picture of Boyd describes his previous experience as Chief Operating Officer at Swirl Films and Senior Vice President of BET Networks. While his experience as COO qualifies him for the position at TPS, Perry comments on how Boyd’s work history relates to his leadership at TPS. Perry says:

As the studio has grown over the last few years, it was important for us to find someone who could handle my busy production slate, in addition to overseeing all of the major outside productions that are shooting at TPS daily. Robert had the right combination of production and business acumen and the strong ability to oversee everything from both a macro and micro perspective. He is a welcome asset to our team, and we are excited to have him on board to keep growing and maintaining the vision of Tyler Perry Studios.

In Perry’s statement he hints at the two different divisions making up TPS and explains the importance of someone positioned at the intersection who can monitor both the production and studio activities. “Production” here means Tyler Perry-affiliated films and television shows; outside productions renting TPS space are considered separately, as studio business. This delineation reflects the increase in outside productions leasing TPS space, along with the ever-

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expanding number of TPS productions that require management. Mr. Perry also refers to a team, who he does not identify. Nonetheless, his use of the word suggests an organizational structure.

J.D. Connor’s analysis of Sony’s leaked emails demonstrates how consolidated leadership in Hollywood is shaped by a team of culturally aligned executives who develop and operate from a shared vision.77 Connor finds that Sony executives exert control through exclusion; TPS operates in a similar fashion. The studio has one voice: Perry’s. Through his choices about content and personnel, we can see how Perry assembles a team that adheres to his vision of what a Black owned studio should be like. TPS’ corporate values are Perry’s values: loyalty, realism, diversity, flexibility, and “hustle,” or the ability to accomplish a combination of tasks that are normally handled by multiple entities in other studios.

Interestingly, in a private conversation with a TPS executive, I learned that Angi Bones was hired to replace Michelle Sneed as president of the company. Although Bones’ title, President of Original Content, differs from Sneed’s, President of Production and Development, these titles are both vague in their wording; even studio workers are unable to discern any distinction between these two executive roles. In other words, the newsfeed posts on executive hirings are clear examples of semi-embedded deep texts: they offer insight into the internal activities of the production culture, but also possess different meanings for the workers within the studio. The vague or unavailable description of the new hire hints at a discordant industry practice that marks TPS as distinct from other studios and limits the definition of Black creative talent to people who fit within Perry’s brand.

Accessed May 2022
3.5 Special Features Section as Semi-Embedded Deep Text

Industry workers feel discordances that originate in executive leadership as well as in talent management. According to IMDB, Tamala Mann currently has 24 credits as an actress, but in the special features section of the Meet the Browns stage play DVD, Tyler Perry shares that Mann had no acting experience whatsoever before she began working with him:

She never acted before when she came to me and she's incredible singer but she's like “No, I can't act,” so I Can Do Bad All by Myself [the stage play] was [her] first time ever acting. She had one line… she’d walk in and bring a cake and say, “Here's the cake,” and she would mess it up every night. And I told her, I was like, “Before this tour is over you are going to be acting and comfortable on stage.” And to see how far she's come has been amazing from that point to where she is now in this show.78

Perry’s insistence that Mann could become an actor and the patience he showed her demonstrate his ethos of cultivating young Black talent. This ethos extends to all cast and crew members, many of whom move through the company from complete amateur to skilled professional. The anecdote about Mann exemplifies how Perry routinely asks cast and crew to perform in unexpected ways. One day when I was working as a costumer on-set for the TV drama The Haves and The Have Nots, Perry became frustrated with the way a particular scene was unfolding. All of a sudden, he said “Cut!,” told me to take off my work belt and step on set. He wanted me to act, but I was a costumer. For background actors and other non-unionized workers, a director giving you a speaking line instantly makes you eligible to join SAG-AFTRA (a/k/a getting “Taft-Hartleyed”79). Joining the union opens up new employment opportunities, as many acting jobs will only hire SAG-AFTRA members. While every aspiring actor hopes for

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78 Perry, Tyler, David Mann, Tamela Mann, Joyce Williams, and Kendrick Mays. Meet the Browns. New Orleans: My TY. PE Productions, 2004.35 secs to 1:15 secs
this kind of luck, Perry’s directing style considers everyone on set, whether behind the camera or in front, as a potential performing artist.

Mann’s career was launched by a similar scenario, though it’s unclear what Mann’s first TPS film role was. Following the archival traces contained within DVD records, it seems that she first appeared in the film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* as Ms. Miller, the mother of the main character, Helen. However, there are no production histories available to the public that could confirm this fact. In the *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* DVD’s special features closing sequence, Mann addresses the camera and says, “and I had told Tyler, I don’t act, but I will sing for you. And I thank him because he saw something that I didn’t see.”

Even though she started out on stage with only one line, and delivered it badly, Perry continued to include her as professional actress in the stage play’s many performances. He fostered an environment of flexibility and learning, allowing Mann to fail at first and later succeed. Typically, an actor’s success is a combination of talent, experience, and professionalism. oftentimes, knowing one’s lines is just as important understanding how the production process works because it effects the pacing and efficiency of the shooting schedule. As an inexperienced actor, Mann’s success is unusual. Mann not only had to trust and believe in Perry’s commitment to her growth, but she also had to possess the confidence and endurance to keep trying after repeated mishaps. Ultimately, she grew as an actor and debuted in the 2005 film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. Mann now appears in most of Perry’s stage plays that feature Madea as well as the film adaptations. In this way, the company accommodates learning and growth in a discordant way.
Perry’s nurturing of new talent and seeing the creative potential in everyone around him creates discord between his business and creative practices and industry standards. It is Perry, not a set of Hollywood rules and restrictions, who decides what is possible on set. He is empowered in his decision-making by two cultural conditions. First, Perry is steeped in the traditions of Black Christian church culture. He grew up in this community and much of TPS’ work targets people within this demographic as its primary audience. The Black Southern Christian tradition is not only a place that centers forgiveness and spiritual growth, but also social justice. Therefore, being a Black production space located in the Bible belt and within an industry and sector that is doubly hostile to Black people situates the studio as a site that nourishes and fortifies Blackness and Perry as a pathway to labor success. Second, Georgia is a right-to-work state, which means that workers cannot be required to join a union as a condition of their employment. The lack of union oversight means that Perry is at liberty to blur labor lines. Telling an unsuspecting costumer to pop onto the set and help out in a scene or two is not a violation of any union regulations or labor laws here in Georgia. In Hollywood, however, this type of spontaneous “get in there, kid” direction would be prohibited.

3.6 Historical Discordance at Tyler Perry Studios

3.6.1 Tyler Perry’s post and speech about Fort McPherson as publicly disclosed deep texts

A caption on Perry’s website explains the fort’s history: “The area was used by military as early as 1835 and served as a Confederate Army base during the Civil War.” In the blog post, the history of the studio is captured using two archival images, some explanatory text, and a quote from Perry. The first image is an illustration of three soldiers standing at attention in a triangular formation. The two soldiers at the back are faded out and lightly contrast the yellow background; the soldier in front is darker, in deep contrast. All three soldiers wear different
military uniforms, hinting that each man is from a different historical period. The title above the soldiers’ heads reads, “A Brief History of Fort McPherson, GA,” implying that it is the cover page of a historical resource, while the bottom text, “Home of The Famous Third Army,” with an encircled capitalized letter “A” suggests that this history is about the Third Army. According to the Georgia Encyclopedia, “The Third Army was headquartered at the fort from 1947 to 2001, and a unit remained there until the base closed” in 2011.  

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Figure 11 Screen grab from Tyler Perry website, referring to the Confederate Army

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In an episode of *Archive Atlanta*, podcaster Victoria Lemos chronicles the history of Fort McPherson. She describes its military connections related to Charner Humphries, the 101st Battalion, the Confederacy, the Union Army, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. In 2005, the government recommended the closure of the base, which was the second time closure had been recommended. The first time happened 30 years earlier, in 1975 but local leaders at that time fought closure because in 1975 Fort McPherson was the city’s seventh largest employer. The Fort’s closure would have meant unemployment for many area workers. Lemos relies on local city archives like the Atlanta History Center to help her construct these historical narratives for her popular podcast.

As described by Lemos, and according to The Fulton County Government Archives, Fort McPherson spanned two geographical locations. In March 1835, Charner Humphries acquired the land in a lottery, built an inn and tavern there, and called it White Hall, which was located where the West End Mall sits today. By December of that same year, White Hall added a US post office, polling station, and meeting and drill ground for the 101st Battalion, which designated it as a military site.\(^81\) When the Confederacy was established in Georgia in 1861, White Hall became a Confederate army base; a barracks and a cartridge factory were also erected there.\(^82\) The Confederacy occupied the area until the end of the Civil War, marked by General Sherman’s burning of Atlanta and his March to the Sea in 1864. In 1867, the US military re-established the site as a military post and named it McPherson Barracks after Union General Major James Birdseye McPherson, who was killed there during the Battle of Atlanta in 1864. In 1881, the area was abandoned and was eventually sold off at a public auction. Some of

\(^81\) Fulton county ga archives http://files.usgwarchives.net/ga/fulton/bios/humphrie331bs.txt
\(^82\) Lemos, Victoria. Episode fort McPherson, Archive Atlanta
this land was purchased by the American Baptist Home Mission Society; this group went on to open the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, better known today as Spelman College.\footnote{ibid}

In 1885, the US government purchased around 140 acres of land 2.5 miles \textit{south} of the original location, and named it Fort McPherson. The Fort accommodated soldiers and prisoners of war, and was a site of war activities during the Spanish War, World War I and World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War and the Cold War. It was also used by The Red Cross, The Knights of Columbus, and the American Library Association. In 1996, one of the Olympics’ opening ceremonies was held at the Fort, making it the first time the US Department of Defense supported the Olympic games.\footnote{ibid}. Finally, the Fort was permanently closed in 2005. The City of Atlanta tasked the McPherson Planning Local Redevelopment Authority with developing a plan for the site, which eventually led to the publicly controversial, private purchase of the former military site for a film and television studio, Tyler Perry Studios.

The second image in the blog post is a photograph that shows two soldiers hanging Christmas decorations around the door to the Third Army’s orderly room. The African American soldier stands on the white soldier’s back in order to reach the top of the doorway. The white soldier smiles into the distance, unperturbed at being used as a human footstool. A quote from Perry appears in the post just below this image: “For the 30 people who showed up for my first play 20 years ago, to the millions who stand with me faithfully today. Thank you, this dream belongs to all of us.” By combining the archival images with his statement of thanks, Perry extends the studio’s success to all the people who supported his work. He also embeds himself in US history by drawing a line from the base’s Confederate military history, to race relations in the modern military, to his ownership of the studio as an achievement for Black people. This blog
post isn’t the only instance of Perry making historical information vivid by contextualizing today’s activities in response to or in spite of African American struggles.

TPS likely used this image to symbolically represent what Tyler Perry references in his BET Award acceptance speech. On BET’s 2019 Awards show, Tyler Perry describes the studio thus:

“The studio was once a Confederate army base… which meant that there were Confederate soldiers on that base plotting and planning on how to keep 3.9 million Negros enslaved. Now that land is owned by one Negro.”

84 “Tyler Perry Acceptance speech for 2019 BET Icon Award”. BET 2019. Awards show. 3:15min into his speech
In the speech, Perry also talks about his mother, Black women, what it’s like being an inspiration to his people, and ownership, but the speech’s through line is gratitude towards God for enabling Perry to help others. The historical reference to Fort McPherson as a former Confederate base attunes the audience to the same accord by reminding them of how far they’ve come. Although the studio rests in a slightly different geographic location than the Confederate site Perry references, it does not matter, since Perry’s re-writing of history results in uplifting a community and achieving a high level of success as the owner of the biggest privately-held Black-owned multimedia company. The discordance between Perry’s statements and historical accuracy furthers the argument of a Black production culture as always centering Black history in the western context of the contemporary world and in relation to their production activities.

At an event that celebrates Blackness in the face of adversity, Taraji P. Henson introduced Perry, that year’s Icon Award winner, as someone who “embodies what the African American dream truly is.” Perry uses racism to frame his success and holds up Fort McPherson’s transformation from Confederate war camp into Tyler Perry Studios as a tangible symbol of African American achievement. Perry’s choice to conceptualize his work as a means of helping others highlights his cultural power while it simultaneously references the historically low socio-economic status Black people have held within American society.

Perry’s public statements invoking Fort McPherson’s racist past establish the studio’s historic significance within America’s history of racism. He weaves a triumphant narrative and allows the Black community to join in on his achievements as the results of not solely his own work, but rather the work of the community as a whole. This ethos not only appeals to Perry’s public, it also serves as a counterpoint to the mainstream Hollywood narrative of the solitary

85 “Taraji P. Henson introduces Tyler Perry to accept Icon Award” BET Awards. 2019
creative genius or film auteur. Therefore, the studio’s legacy is discordant with that of other studios commonly perceived as quintessential hallmarks of American culture. This discordance is a marker of progress and a token of equality, similar to how Shomade describes BET.

3.7 Prayer Circles & Gospel Songs as fully-embedded deep texts

Similar to the way TPS positions Fort McPherson as historically discordant with other studios, TPS’s practices involving Black church culture are discordant with mainstream media production. Religion is a topic usually avoided in work environments because discussions of religion elicit strong opinions which can lead to friction and disagreements between coworkers. At TPS, however, spirituality is both encouraged and regularly practiced onsite.

A sense of solidarity and trust is affirmed through a daily morning prayer and impromptu gospel performances. On the mornings of shoot days, when Perry walks on set, someone, usually an assistant director or a production assistant, but sometimes Perry himself says, “Okay, let’s circle up to get started.” Upon hearing this summons, everyone stops their work, congregates in Perry’s general area, forms a circle, and holds hands. With eyes closed and heads bowed, Perry leads the group in a prayer. In this prayer, he always thanks God for the things he, the cast, and crew have been able accomplish. This simple ritual sets the tone; it brings everyone together and establishes an air of confidence, spirituality, and peace for the day. Everyone is invited to join the circle regardless of department, position, relationship, and/or religious affiliation.

Adding to the studio’s sonic soundscape are the gospel performances that spontaneously erupt on, or near sets. These performances are generally performed by the Hair and Makeup Unit (HMU) and happen near where filming is taking place, but without interrupting the flow of traffic. As part of the set crew, I have witnessed the HMU singing gospel songs, sometimes playfully and other times more seriously.
Gospel music has played a significant role in Perry’s productions; his early work was frequently described as gospel dramas or morality plays. Christianity is a prominent theme in this type of theatre, which attracts a largely church-going audience. In the Chitlin Circuit’s vaudevillian early days, the Black church was the most influential institution in Black communities. Promoters even advertised stage plays to church congregations through sermons and as part of the announcements during Sunday service.

Perry’s use of gospel music to attract a Black Christian female audience has been theorized by Lisa M. Allen-McLaurin in her essay “Jesus will Fit It, After While.” Allen-McLaurin explains that Perry uses gospel music and prayer to:

1. identify his works as thoroughly Christian in nature,
2. underscore his works’ messages that God and/or Jesus are the answers for any and all problems,
3. to increase the ability of the overwhelmingly black female audience to identify with his works and characters,
4. to provide the vehicle for his predominantly stellar vocal casts to perform in their most comfortable and recognizable genres.\(^6\)

Gospel music is clearly a valid and valuable marketing tool, considering Allen-McLaurin’s 2009 statistic that “84 percent of African American women say religion is very important to them.”\(^7\)

Although Allen-McLaurin is referring to the audience’s attraction to Perry’s work, I would extend this analysis to TPS cast and crew as well, since these people are part of the TPS audience too.

On the set of *Greenleaf*, a TPS drama about a Christian family that leads a megachurch in Memphis, Tennessee, the cast and crew adopt conservative behavior and playfully use Southern

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\(^7\) ibid, pg. 62.
dialect when speaking off-camera. As a costumer, I have observed the tendency for the workplace culture surrounding a particular show or movie to adopt and reflect the production’s principles, values, and practices as communicated through content, storyline, and narrative. For example, in the costume department under the direction of Johnetta Boone, a devout Christian, costumers were strongly encouraged to dress conservatively. Even as early as the hiring stage, we costumers were forbidden to wear short skirts, shirts that exposed our cleavage, yoga pants, and other form-fitting pants. Wearing these outlawed articles of clothing resulted in a worker being sent home. If a worker wore a shirt that did not cover her buttocks, she would be required to tie a shirt or jacket around her waist to cover the lower extremities.

The conservative nature of these rules can be partially attributed to Boone’s religious beliefs; however, in this case, the filming location also contributed to the workplace culture. *Greenleaf* often filmed inside House of Hope Atlanta, an active Baptist church, many of whose congregants were background workers on the production. In this context, the strict dress code can be understood as an act of care: the production’s managers did not wish to embarrass or humble workers who belonged to the church’s community by disrespecting the church’s boundaries. Less altruistically, perhaps, the production managers also wanted to remain on good terms with the church so that *Greenleaf* could continue to film there.

Many HMU crew members become familiar with the studio’s unique production culture after working on Perry’s stage plays: they tour alongside the actors and are exposed to the musical nature of these productions. The habits and routines developed and practiced during the theatrical tours are brought back to TPS homebased and reenacted backstage or in the camera villages of film and TV shows. Gospel singing is part of the soundscape of TPS.

The diversity within the studio engenders a multicultural climate, allowing the prayer
ritual to orient people in the present time and place. Although Perry clearly holds Christian beliefs, holding hands and singing together also reinforces everyone’s humanity, creating a space forgiving of human error. The ritual supports an improvisational mode of working: everyone is given the grace to both succeed and fail. These themes of forgiveness and redemption are woven into Black cultural practices and are rooted in Black religious and community values. These practices, so endemic to Black culture, are discordant with industry standards. Although the Christian orientation limits how TPS workers can express their Blackness, they also benefit from Perry’s Christian values that shape a workplace culture of compassion and forgiveness.

3.8 Conclusion

In a 2003 article for Jet magazine, Perry asks white Hollywood, “What makes your art any better than ours or what I do? Is it because the establishment has told you this is the way it’s supposed to be or how we do it? What makes that better than what’s real to us as Black people? For Perry, the African American people’s experiences and ways of knowing represent a wealth of material he can use as sources for his stories that validate the lives, motivations, fears, anxieties, and aspirations of a community of underserved individuals. The popularity of Tyler Perry Studio productions reveals that audiences are eager to see stories that reflect the lives of Black people. Although Perry has been critically taken to task for his deployment of stereotypes, crude staging, implausibility, and spectacle Kaylois Henry correctly reframes Perry’s work as “a spiritual broth, a rich and nourishing traditional culinary spice.”

In this chapter, discordance is described as a feature of Black production culture and reflective of the positions Black media companies take within the broader media industries.

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Though Black production cultures often take alternate routes to the act of creation, there are ways to make these structures and practices visible by looking in the margins of production objects, spaces, and rituals. In these margins, I have found how TPS is discordant in relation to mainstream Hollywood. Some examples include Perry’s hiring and promoting of people who align with his worldview, the themes of which he also espouses in his productions and in the studio workplace culture: family values, religion, love, and forgiveness. These themes reflect his definition of Blackness and Black identity, which are somewhat conservative in comparison to the commercialized form of Blackness found elsewhere in the mediascape, or Shomade found in the case of BET. In order to preserve these cultural practices, archivists need to familiarize themselves with these communities and look for evidence in spaces often hidden and out of view. As I have argued in this chapter, discordance serves as a hint to radical preservation, a wayfinding device that tells us where to locate the traces of historical importance.
4 Performing Resistance: Black Production Culture Is Improvisational

Theatre and performance studies describe improvisation in terms of talent, dexterity, and technique. Through an analysis of 18th century commedia del arte by playwright Carlo Gozzi, Domenico Pietropaolo explains improvisation as “a matter of disciplined movement within the limits of demarcating the range of creative legitimacy available to the performer.”\(^8\)\(^9\) This mastery of movement allows the body to create meaning using a vocabulary constructed by the genre and surrounding community. Danielle Goldman describes improvisation as “a full-bodied critical engagement with the world characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness.”\(^9\)\(^0\) For Goldman, improvisational acts are skillful and trained responses to one’s constantly shifting historical and social conditions that require technical awareness and knowledge. This social awareness is emphasized in Aku Kadogo’s definition of improvisation: “to sense the other performers you are in the space with, to know when to blend into one another’s tempo, to match the dynamic of each person in the scene and know when to answer the call to serve your own impulses.”\(^9\)\(^1\) Although the theatrical tradition defines improvisation as a technique, practice, and awareness—all learned behaviors—in theories of Blackness, improvisation is a way of being and a response to lived experience.

For Moten, Black performance is the work of the ensemble as a set of social, sensual, and sensory arrangements constituting Blackness and Black history. Moten describes Blackness as improvisation. Blackness as a sociality is a way of creating, informed by certain racialized

\(^8\) Pietropaolo, Domenico. Semiotics and Pragmatics of Stage Improvisation” Bloomsbury publishing. 2016. pg 16
\(^9\) Goldman, Danielle. I Want to Be Ready. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, Pg. 5
\(^0\) Goldman, Danielle. I Want to Be Ready. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, Pg. 5
experiences of objecthood affording an attunement of spirit. Black performance is the effect of creative decisions made at the intersection of embodied knowledge, experiences of subjectivity and objectivity within and always in response to constraints of institutional standards. The Improvisational ruptures, breaks, cuts, and blurs causing discordance in time, space, and meaning.

By applying this form of Blackness as performance constituted by racialized experiences, we understand that the discordances we see are the interventions of bodies who had to hack, augment, and manipulate the creative practice. This improvisational production culture, born out of the legacies of slavery and plantation life in Black popular culture, transcends its origins and grows into its own rarified genus. Tricia Rose explains it thus: “The incorporation and marginalization of Black practitioners has also fostered the development of Black forms and practices that are less and less accessible, forms that require greater knowledge of Black language and style in order to participate,” or what others call Black code.

Elsewhere, Richard L. Schur cites Rose and Albert Murray to explain how improvisation operates in the break as, “a temporary interruption in the established cadence…which usually requires a fill or solo.” The break is a moment in a song developed by jazz, but it also appears in other types of Black performance. The break is where improvisation creates and expresses individual identity. Anna Deavere Smith calls these breaks “ruptures” or abrupt stops and rhythmic asymmetries, which become sites of pleasure for the listener who understands them as a deconstruction of a pattern that makes space for new meanings. In the break is also where

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92 Rose. Black Noise
Moten defines Blackness as improvisation, making it the basis of all Black performance. Bringing this idea back to my analysis of Tyler Perry Studios, I see what some critics call visual failures as Black performances that reflect improvisation and a system of encoding.

Black performance relies on sensibilities of Blackness or otherness. Therefore, goals, practices, and aesthetics in Black production cultures are different from standard film and television production. I argue TPS’ foundation in the Chitlin Circuit and Black theatre persists through a system of aesthetics and improvisation that have carried over into its screen productions and workplace culture. Through improvisational ways of working, TPS fuses Black cultural values of signifying into its media content and the studio’s inner workings. For example, scripts are written quickly, with space to allow for variable interpretations; in turn, cast members are free (and encouraged) to adlib and incorporate Black vernacular behaviors into their performances such as snapping, playing the dozens, call and response, wordplay, and so on. In this chapter, I identify the improvisational mode of working at the core of TPS’ production culture by examining disclosures, materiality, and production practices.

4.1 Improvisation in Black Theatre

William Alexander Brown’s African Grove Theatre, founded in 1821, William Wells Brown’s The Escape, or: A Leap for Freedom (1858), and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk (1898) are considered the foundational texts to Black radical thought and Black theatre alike. Each encouraged Black people to “develop artistic endeavors that reflected the soul of black people;” “look to themselves for the wellspring of creativity;” and use performance as resistance and means towards liberation. Though many people in the Black

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theatre community agreed with these ideals, debate ensued around the best strategies to produce Black theatre.

In a 1971, Roscoe Orman wrote in *Black Theatre*, “Everything that exists within the consciousness of the Black people, from the deepest of dreams to the physical manifestation of those dreams, is part of the fabric that makes up Black Theatre.”

Established in 1968, *Black Theatre* magazine reported on Black theatre news from centers of Black cultural production: New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, Oakland, and Philadelphia. Edited by former Black Panther Minister of Culture and playwright, Ed Bullins, the magazine followed the radical pulses of the Black Arts Movement, considered “the aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power Movement.”

Following the socially aware, activist plays written by Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, theatre makers and critics observed Black theatre as a site in which politics and cultural imperatives could be found and interrogated.

Chitlin’ Circuit stage plays, on the other hand, were less concerned with public opinion and political action. They were also extraordinarily popular and lucrative. In “The Chitlin’ Circuit,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that part of Chitlin Circuit playwright Shelly Garrett’s success came from a formula: a singular production repeated with slight variations. The productions, *Beauty Shop, Living Room, Barber Shop*, and *Laundromat*, recycled tropes, characters, and themes. Within these plays, Garrett activated stereotypes, making them familiar and easily accessible to the Black community. In addition to Gates’ analysis of the formal elements in Garrett’s productions, he also notes Garrett’s business acumen:

> He is known for his skill in saturating black press and radio stations. He is also known for the money he makes selling merchandise like T-shirts and programs. He can tell you that average ticket prices are $27.50, that he rarely plays a venue with

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97 NEAL, Larry. Black arts movement. TDR 1968 pg 29
fewer than 2,000 seas, that a show he did in Atlanta netted about $600,000 a week (For purposes of comparison, the weekly net of hit “straight” plays – like *Masterclass*, *Taking Sides*, and so forth – is typically between $100,000 and $200,000: the weekly net of hit musicals like *Miss Saigon*, *Les Misérables*, and *Sunset Boulevard* is usually in the neighborhood of $500,000).

These productions are comedic, intensely dramatic, present stereotypical characters, invite punning and exchange, and are cathartic to experience. *Beauty Shop* celebrated its 30-year anniversary at Newark Symphony Hall in Newark, New Jersey on October 29, 2016. It continues to be one of the most popular Chitlin’ Circuit shows and can still be viewed on DVD, available for purchase through the www.shellygarrettentertainment.com, despite Garrett’s passing in 2018. Garrett’s website describes the show:

> The setting is an urban beauty salon, based in Los Angeles. The “Pamper Me” beauty shop is presided over by “Terri Fuller,” who spends more time trying to keep peace in the shop than she does doing any hair. Then there is the wildly, crowd-pleasing favorite, “Christopher Rich,” the male and gay hairdresser. If no one ever gets their hair done during the two-act performance, many people will get their heads re-arranged, courtesy of Christopher Rich’s lip! No one gets the best of him! He verbally buries all comers during the war of gay jokes, fat jokes, short jokes, ugly jokes, and all funny one-liners that fly around the shop, inhabited mostly by very well-dressed women. Plenty of trash is spoken and the body language is anything but shy. The ending of the show, which has been called a perfect “Cinderella” ending, leaves tears of happiness and joy in the eyes of the audience.

The play’s popularity stems from its ability to present live and sensational spectacles.

Although the audience’s experience is partly responsible for the show’s success, its relatability and authenticity are what attract audiences and keep them engaged. The staging, characters, and

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set design replicate real-life issues and situations within Black communities.

This repeated re-staging of issues, situations, and trauma inherent in Black life is considered a theatrical device in Black performance theory, Black studies, and Black theatre studies, all of which refer to it as the “repetition/reproduction dyad.”

Prostitution, gambling, and abuse are the legacies of oppression, enslavement, and dispossession. Presenting these situations in the theatrical setting offers Black audience members a way to engage with and transform generational trauma through improvisation, catharsis, and humor. Though there has been some disagreement about the role of trauma in Black expressive culture, these performances are persistent practices that help communities respond to trauma and restore dignity in identity.

In Karen Bowdre’s “Spike and Tyler’s Beef: Blackness, Authenticity, and Discourses of Black Exceptionalism,” she contextualizes the quality of Black imagery as part of a discussion about how directors qualify their Blackness as they tell Black stories. On the work of Tyler Perry and Spike Lee, she writes, “While Perry’s associations with markets/audiences link him to a type of blackness, Lee’s insistence of authenticity often lies in his claims that his films ‘tell the truth’ about Black life in ways that most films, particularly those from white directors, do not”.

Although Bowdre’s analysis is based on Perry’s and Lee’s film work, her central point remains the same: criticism of Black cultural material does not simply measure whether images are good or bad, but also gauges the director’s relationship to Blackness, their audience, and how the material functions. Perry, along with other playwrights like Shelly Garrett, David Talbert, and

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the duo Je’Caryous Johnson and Gary Guidry, set their brand of American theatre apart from mainstream American theatre, dubbing it the “Chitlin’ Circuit.”

In the same anthology as Bowdre’s essay, Shaw presents a historiography of the Chitlin Circuit in “From the Margins to Center Stage: Tyler Perry’s Popular African American Theatre.” Shaw attributes Perry’s popularity to three key moments in American theatre history: the Astor Place riot of 1849, the rise of segregated Black performance at the turn of the century, and the rise of motion pictures as the dominant form of entertainment. Here, she identifies moments in the splintering of African American theatre into two genres: highbrow theatre and lowbrow popular urban theatre. She places Tyler Perry’s productions in the latter and August Wilson’s and Lorraine Hansberry’s in the former.

Though I tend to agree with Shaw, I also point to the discourse around Black Popular culture to clarify the work of these playwrights. In Stuart Hall’s remarkable essay, “What is this ‘black’ in Black Popular Culture?” Hall picks up on Cornel West’s analysis of the cultural politics of difference and the global postmodern; Mikhail Bakhtin’s “carnivalesque;” and Antonio Gramsci’s “the national popular” to argue that popular culture has always involved the contradictory, the vulgar, and inauthentic; it is the dominant form of commodification. Hall says,

It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations pass into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur. It is rooted in popular experience and available for expropriation at one and the same time.

The idea that popular culture involves stereotypical, easily reusable images made for and because of racial, capitalist modes of production distinguishes this kind of cultural material and other vernacular traditions rooted in Africa.

Hall offers the Black repertoire, what he refers to as style, music, and the body, as primary sites of cultural development because “we were excluded from the cultural mainstream,” where the mastery of writing and criticism is the hallmark of culture. Given this exclusionary definition, Black popular culture became “selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions alongside African heritage,” which ultimately led to impure, always partially synchronized “negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying.” This signifying, tied to the now, new, and modern in the mode of the repertoire is improvisational and discordant. It constitutes Black popular culture and is the basis for Black production culture.

Perry’s plays rely heavily on improvisation: pieces can be made to fit, parts interchangeable, and “the show must go on” through faith in the collective. In the DVD special features of Madea’s Goes To Jail, Tyler Perry and Chantell Christopher, who played “Vanessa” in the stage play version, describe how her performance was completely improvised. Through an interesting montage of Tyler Perry stage address, an interview, voiceover, and inserted scenes, they describe how Christopher’s first stage performance in Class Reunion was completely impromptu. They explain that Perry had invited her to see the show with the intention of replacing an actresses with whom Perry was experiencing friction. When the actress learned of Perry’s plan to replace her, she quit right before the show started. Christopher, who had just that

104 Ibid pg 28
morning arrived in town, was sitting in the audience holding a copy of the script. Perry asked her to fill the recently-vacated role right there and then. Without even seeing or reading the script,

Christopher performed. She said, “If you game, I’m game...he said put the outfit on...and we got up and we winged that entire show...nobody knew...nobody knew.” Christopher’s performance within the larger TPS context is not atypical, but rather characteristic of Perry’s mode of working. These ad-hoc performances represent the ensemble, a distinct feature of improvisation according to Moten, who says, “Ensemble is and requires attunement not only to the name but to the phrase.” Improvisational Blackness, then, is the music produced between the experiences and expressions of Black people as they simultaneously act as both subject and object.

At the end of the *Madea’s Family Reunion* theatrical recording DVD, Tyler Perry steps on stage and says, “I want to improve the quality of the theatre, the sound, the visuals, the acting, the plot. I want people to know when they come to see a Tyler Perry play it means quality.” In his audience address, Perry refers to all Black theatre of the Chitlin Circuit variety, not the works of Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, or Adrienne Kennedy. Perry, along with other Chitlin Circuit playwrights, have pioneered a theatrical form of Black popular culture based on the everyday lives of Black people that serves everyday Black folk. This group perceived a lack of theatrical entertainment designed specifically for Black audiences and cultivated an underserved market. Chitlin Circuit entertainment is similar to a traveling circus: both were rare, exciting events that provided novel opportunities for Black audiences to gather, eat, drink, and laugh.

These performances, often staged in familiar concert venues rather than in traditional

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106 Moten, pg 138
theatres, served soul food and mixed drinks. They were designed for a Black spectatorship.

Rashida Shaw McMahon describes her experience in *The Black Circuit* as a multi-sensory affair:

> The smell of BBQ chicken and rib dinners is now thick in the air. In addition to a red cloth-covered alcohol and beverage bar that one would normally encounter in many regional and Broadway theatres, there is a vendor who is selling warm pretzels and the booth of one of the most popular rib restaurants on the South Side: JJ Robinson’s. As I continue to walk, I observe an increasing crowd of Black patrons of all ages laughing, talking, eating, and greeting each other familiarly from afar.\textsuperscript{107}

These plays were a reason to gather and have a good time. Chitlin Circuit productions are equal parts entertainment and promotion. Early on in his career, Perry worked with Melvin Childs, a radio personality and promoter. In his tell-all book, *Never Would Have Made it*, Childs talks about how stage plays were produced and promoted like concerts. Promoters were interested in whatever could make money and fill a venue, without much consideration to the content. After seeing how *Mama I’m Sorry*, a play written by Michael Matthews and presented at the Brady Theatre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, grossed $40,000 in one night with poor writing, poor acting, and poor sets, Childs was inspired to promote a gospel play like he was doing with concerts and musical events.

Perry requested $25,000 to put on a one-week run of *I Know I’ve Been Changed* in five cities. The tour visited Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Wichita, Little Rock, and St. Louis. The $25,000 advance covered the actors’ wages and production costs. Childs borrowed $50,000 to pay Perry’s $25,000 request; the rest of this among covered the writer’s fee, advertising costs, transportation expenses, actors’ accommodations, and venue fees. Childs calculated his potential profit based solely on ticket prices of $25 per seat, minus expenses.

Although these productions are rooted in Black theatre, Tyler Perry Studios is also an outgrowth of Black radical thinking. The improvisational aesthetic structure is shaped by a knowing informed by the Black experience, a politics of the ensemble, a deep commitment to Black life, and economic opportunities. Perry, like the Chitlin Circuit promoters, are eager to find, create, and make deals that yield large profits. Thus, a production’s aesthetics are designed with the bottom line in mind: Chitlin Circuit plays are widely appealing, accessible, and highly visible. From what we have learned above, Blackness is defined in terms both of cultural tradition and constrained economic opportunity. In this section, I will contextualize the improvisational practices at Tyler Perry Studios with an examination of its historical and cultural context.

4.2 Improvisation and TPS Production Practices

The people who work at TPS (like Chitlin Circuit workers) do not follow traditional industrial pathways like their counterparts at mainstream Hollywood studios; therefore, they make tools and create methods of their own design. This process of improvisation can be observed in how studio workers adapt their practices on the fly to respond to rapid production changes. In my own experience working as a costumer on the set of Tyler Perry’s The Haves and The Have Nots, Perry asked for my thoughts on the costumes worn by two actors. He asked if I thought the actors should switch clothes, based on the characters they were playing. His question was an unusual one: typically, costume designers plan out all the creative decisions and costumers merely follow the plan. Design decisions are the result of study, planning, proposals; conversations about characterization happen at the executive and creative level, not at the filming stage, of the production. Costumers perform the labor involved in executing and maintaining the designer’s vision, whereas designers research, storyboard, sketch, plan, and design.
In that moment, Perry’s question disrupted the normal studio hierarchy of costume design. At the same time, he foregrounded the people around him and their ideas, labor, knowledge, perspectives, and lived experiences. Essentially, he asked me to improvise and make a snap judgment call based on my understanding of those characters as authentic representations of contemporary Black culture, regardless of my official capacity, seniority, or status as a costumer. This example illustrates how cast and crew constantly improvise; there is evidence of this make-it-work ethos across TPS’ fully-embedded deep texts. These materials are hidden from the viewing public and therefore truly reflect the company’s inner workings. They are purely functional, circulated only for production purposes, which means they are created with little concern for aesthetics and/or long-term preservation.

4.2.1 Filmmaking at the Pace of Theatre

The pace of production drives the improvisational workplace culture at TPS. Leadership’s goal is to produce film and television content at the temporal logic of live theatre, therefore, cast and crew adjust their practices to avoid stopping the camera during filming. Though there is no predetermined amount of time for the creation of a new film or television show, in my experience as a costumer the process normally takes between three to six months. At TPS, that timeline shrinks down to just six to eight weeks for a film and even shorter for a TV show, from the pre-production preparation stage to the completion of post-production activities. Considering Perry’s production slate, this timeline has repeatedly emerged as the most efficient production schedule for a television product. This rapid production method, combined with a need for more comedic content at TBS, ultimately led to the monumental 10-90 deal for the show, *House of Payne*. In Alfred Martin’s “Building and Rebuilding Generic Closets” chapter in *The Generic Closet*, he reveals how a shift in television production resulted from this
distribution deal. In 2006, TBS paid $200 million for 90 episodes of original content that cost Tyler Perry $60 million to produce. This deal, based on 10 successful episodes of House of Payne, established the 10-90 deal. The 10-90 model is a structure that requires the distribution company to purchase 90 episodes of a show if the first 10 episodes hit pre-determined ratings targets. This deal was particularly interesting because it bypassed the network’s convention of picking-up/cancelling shows based on seasonal ratings, unless they reached 80 to 100 episodes, the point at which a show becomes viable for syndication. The House of Payne deal allowed producers to cut out cable network middlemen and sell syndication-ready content at a higher margin of profit.

With statements from showrunner Ali Leroi, Martin explains how the deal drastically increased the pace of production at every stage and made mass-marketable content more attractive as many producers were motivated by episodic syndication’s potential earnings. The distribution company also sought popular content to ensure profit or later syndication, so part of the producers’ development strategy was to build a marketing component into the product. For Ali and Martin this “secret ingredient” was rap, hip hop, and Black culture. For Perry, it was simply Black culture set at the speed of light. This model transformed an already fast production schedule based on live theatre practices into a faster one, able to deliver more content in less time, with less money, less manpower, and fewer resources but ultimately yielding more profit. Wanting to replicate House of Payne’s success, the studio began devising new ways to produce more content for less.

At TPS, workers usually have two weeks to prepare before principal photography and two weeks for wrap during post-production. Principal photography usually lasts between two to four weeks, depending on the type of show: 30-minute sitcom, hourlong drama, or full-length
feature film. Therefore, while TPS is shooting more content in a shorter time frame, the workday and length of production are also shorter on average. An average workday is about ten hours. A short day is eight hours, and a long day is twelve hours. Working with Perry may be hectic, but it is also humane. By comparison, costume designer Allisa Swanson, describes the grueling schedules she has endured when working for other studios: “I’ve worked 7 days a week for 3-months straight. A short day is 12.5 hours, an average day is probably 14.5 hours. I’ve had 24- hour days. I’ve had absolutely no life. My parents don’t know who I am.” A 24-hour workday at TPS is unheard-of. TPS’ schedule prioritizes pace of production over perfection of image.

Examining crew lists, call sheets, and personal disclosures as fully embedded deep texts, improvisational TPS’ organizational structure and labor distribution practices become clear. Tasks are executed and decisions are made in the moment and require heightened sensitivity and awareness of Perry’s workflow. To stop camera is to stall production, and to stall production is to slow Perry’s momentum, all of which puts you out of sync with Tyler Perry Studios.

4.2.2 Personal Disclosures as Fully Embedded Deep Texts

In this section, I examine crew lists and call sheets from *Haves and the Have Nots; Love Thy Neighbor; BRUH; House of Payne; and Assisted Living* all produced by Tyler Perry studios, *in comparison to Netflix’s First Kill; and ABC’s Quantico*. These documents typically list crew members in alphabetical order, yet I find deviations from common industry practices that can be attributed to TPS’ improvisational production culture. Improvisational production creates ruptures and bulges; these are evidenced in production documents, which reflect constant

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108 YouTube. The crew. Allison Swanson. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ii-hT56QLCs 5min 59secs
reorientation and redistribution of resources. These fully embedded deep texts are materials only available and accessible to the production crew, therefore they are not self-conscious materials and allow the researcher to see how the company works, warts and all, without consideration for reputation, image, or brand.

Production departments create and distribute crew lists via email. These lists are used as a directory amongst the crew members and typically include a table of contents, job titles and contact information for everyone working on the production. Contact information for the studio usually appears on the last page.

In the crew lists for ABC’s *Quantico* and Netflix’s *First Kill*, produced in 2015 and 2021, respectively, there are differences in arrangement that follow an immediately discernable logic. For *Quantico*, the table of contents is arranged in alphabetical order according to department. For *First Kill*, “Story/Writers,” “Belletrist Productions,” “Directors,” and “Production” appear before all other departments, which are listed alphabetically. This arrangement reflects a commonly shared understanding that the crew members of these four departments constitute the production’s core creative team that controls the production’s direction.
Season 1
Netflix / First Kill
Production Office: 678-961-0709

CREW LIST
PRELIM WHITE VERSION 38 | 04/09/21

Netflix Productions, LLC
5835 W. Sunset Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90028
United States

Production Office - 2nd Floor
6010 Studio Way, Bld, 300, Ste. 202
Union City, GA 30291
United States

Set Dec Warehouse
614 Ilchalken Rd
Fairburn, GA 30213
United States

Confidential Safety Hotline: 844-222-1739 or www.productionhotline.com

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Music</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sound</td>
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<td>18-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netflix</td>
<td>20-27</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13. Crew list for First Kill, 2021
Figure 14. Crew list for *Quintico*, 2015
The 2015 crew list for Tyler Perry’s HHN/LTN is a 26-page document that represents television production at TPS – Greenbriar. At that time, TPS had just started producing two shows simultaneously. Crew members were asked to work across both shows as seen in the cover of the crew list below. Both shows appear on the document. In the costumes department, this dual focus was reflected in the division of labor at the level of continuity. There was one key costumer (“key”) for each production, while all the other department members worked on both shows. In theory, this arrangement was meant to apply to everyone, but the keys became responsible for their respective scripts. In practice, however, keys also assumed the responsibility for continuity, making them departmental continuity managers and authors of the final continuity book.

As the key costumer, I would memorize the script in terms of order, plots, content, and characters, so that I could advise the design team. For example, when designing for Emily, (work which involves selecting items from stock, shopping, or the character’s closet) I may follow behind the costume designer and provide contextual details such as, “This is the scene where Emily just arrived at the bowling alley for group date and gets cake all over her. It is raining outside, Emily’s date, Omar, is in orange. Jeff and Patricia are also in this scene, Patricia is in red and Jeff is in blue. Emily is coming from home and it’s the last time we see her.” The designer might ask for additional details about the scene or the actor like, “What time of day is it?” Or “Did she like those loafers she wore last time?” Knowing the script backwards and forwards allows us to expedite the design process and means the designers don’t need to memorize all the details for both shows.

Across TPS crew lists, we see different practices at work than is standard within the industry. The adjustments evidenced within these documents reflect the improvisational nature of
the production culture. Finding these improvisations in paperwork can lead an archivist or investigator to ask relevant questions of the creative workers who deal with this material culture. Across departments, whether costuming, sound, or post-production, we see that improvisation relayed through in-house documentation leads to a sense of the collective production culture, defining what it means to work within Tyler Perry Studios.

Figure 15. crew list for If Loving You is Wrong and Love Thy Neighbor, 2015
4.2.2.1 Derron Cherry and Costume Design

To expand on the costume design process, and to illustrate the physical traces of improvisation, I interviewed Derron Cherry, one of the two head costume designers at Tyler Perry Studios. Cherry described his creative process within the fast-paced TPS environment.

Traditionally, costuming decisions are made by the departmental team comprised of the costume designer, assistant costume designer, and the shoppers. Costumers work with the team, but are not part of the decision-making process. They execute the costume designer’s vision and work in proximity to the creative process, which allows them to see how each design decision supports the production as a whole. Cherry says,

I am the guy who will get up at six in the morning, start shopping online, get to work, go through the stores and shop, go home, take a shower and come back and shop online all night because I know that things the following morning will ship as soon as they open. That is the kind of passion that I have to make sure that I'm getting the clothes that I want. And I will shop the entire world and bring in billions of dollars’ worth of stuff and only keep 100,000 because it's worth having everything in to get the best of the best for what you can present. The thing is: you can only do the best that you can do in that time in that moment. And so, I really try to utilize every waking second that I do have. And I really do mean this like I'm taking my free Sunday I'm not being paid for yesterday, I'm not being paid for today, I've spent over $6,000 in the past two days, just shopping the stores myself because I want to make sure that who I described on that character reads and that when I move on to season four that I set the tone for who that character is, if it wasn't done right in season one or season two, when I touch it, it will be done right.

Although Cherry describes part of his creative process as dictated by store hours and retail schedules, he also hints at the time constraints imposed by the demanding production schedule: “The thing is: you can only do what you can do in that time in that moment. And so, I really try to utilize every waking second that I do have.” Instead of getting frustrated by the
schedule’s limitations, he sees it as an opportunity to push himself to create something impactful within the time allowed. For Cherry, his improvisational approach to costuming allows him to perform successfully in this environment.

The greatest challenge for creative professionals at TPS is to leave a mark. The task for crew members is to produce quality content that not only fits TPS’ brand and rapid production schedule, but that is also marketable and profitable for the company. In some ways, these goals shift the definition of creativity from a matter of design and aesthetics to a matter of engineering and management. In the costume department some people have described TPS costume designing as more akin to “styling” rather than “designing.” This conceptualization emphasizes how the lack of time can create feelings of limited creative possibilities. In response to this idea, Derron Cherry says,

“This is a situation where you can just style. Every opportunity you get to do what God is allowing you to do is the opportunity to do it. So, as a costume designer, I disagree. I am a designer and that is what I’m doing. I’m buying fabrics to actually go out and build even though I know we only have a week before we go to camera. I am the same person that's buying a blazer and saying Okay, let's take this…leave this… let's add fringe down the center of this. To make this more something let's take this in and add a belt so that we can make this a different look. I'm buying clothes at the store and buying them intentionally to know that this is more driven to my character and not this kind of fits who I was trying to dress, which you've seen me do like I come up there in the heat of the moment and I’m dying for a fucking suit jacket for Mr. Brown because I wanted it to match lime green boots, because that's character driven. It's easy to get him a zebra blazer. But where are you going to find a lime green and black one? Nowhere!... that individuality speaks to the character themselves.”

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[109] Derron Cherry interview, 2021
Cherry agrees that the improvisational nature of TPS is discordant with industry practices and that it does afford him with creative opportunities, but he also makes a distinction between what he does as a designer and what others do as stylists. Stylists select clothing based on what is commercially available, according to the needs of the contract. Stylists generally work in the fashion industry, in editorial and advertisement. Designers use the script to create costumes for characters by combining a variety of methods including shopping, construction and deconstruction, and tailoring. While the production schedule compels designers to use retail shopping to support their vision, design is specifically character driven and calls for different sources of creativity to produce sartorial works of art that align with the character and scenario.

Cherry refines what it means to do it right by returning to the original function of the designer as the act of creating an impact on the reading and interpretation of a character, despite production conditions. By finding solace in a job well done, Cherry overcomes structural limitations imposed on his creativity and asserts his humanity in the face exploitative, capitalist working conditions. In this way, he aligns with Angela Davis’s insistence on radical revolutionary action as a function of “grasping at the root" of oppression as a strategy towards equality. Though Davis was talking about and to Black women, this definition of radical strategy connects Cherry to Robinson’s assertion of the radical practices of the enslaved and economically disenfranchised as acts of agency and liberation found in all communities of economic victimization, specifically within racial capitalist regimes.

With pacing set to the speed of theatre and live production, TPS productions rely on crews working together as ensembles, being on the same accord, attuning to Perry’s workflow,

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110 Davis, Angela. "Let Us All Rise Together: Radical Perspectives on Empowerment for Afro-American Women:" in Women, Culture, & Politics.
and making decisions instinctively. These practices represent a departure from standard studio practices, in which below-the-line crew members work to uphold the department head’s vision. At TPS, to ensure one’s vision or leave an imprint on the image one must be one step ahead, creatively and temporally, than the set crew, since creative decisions are not just executed, but born, on set.

4.2.2.2 Jennifer Carriere and Script Supervising

Like costumes, script management has existed within TPS production since the beginning of company. However, as the company developed, the managing aspects of these areas have become more complex and sophisticated. As established above, TPS uses live theatre as its model for film and television production. For example, in a stage production, the costumes, set design, props, lighting, sound, and music are generally established prior to opening night and executed the same way for all performances of a show. These decisions carry over to all future iterations of the production; a production “mold” is created so that the time and labor required to plan a show only is expended once. Departments at TPS are expected to prepare similarly, so that work can be executed quickly or in real time, with minimal dithering eating up valuable time. Tinkering with this model, TPS challenges the temporal logic of film and television production. As reflected in the call sheets and larger crew lists above, technicians are hired for multiple shows simultaneously. This redistribution of labor places a premium on swiftness and flexibility as key assets.

Although this model has created faster pacing in production it also has forced new ways of working to accommodate the workflow and temporal logic. In an interview with Jennifer Carriere, script supervisor and associate producer at TPS, she explains how her job and role was created and modified due to issues resulting from the increased pacing and production workflow.
“We have to help make sure that we are, in the broadest terms, we have to make sure that the day's work is a success, that there are no delays, that everything that Mr. Perry has said he wants or has not said he wants, but we know we need or he needs, or we can with confidence predict he will want, that all of those things are there. They're ready to work. And they're what he wants. The name of the game at that studio is time. So, someone needs to be on set in addition to the AD. So of course, to make sure that trains run on time and the accuracy that we need to support communication between the departments and that is not going to happen without the producer doing it... because we don't have the time for production meetings. It's just simply not part of our workflow is not part of our official workflows. So, somebody needs to be running around in the background, making sure the departments are communicating and that we have everything we need for the day, and that we're preparing. You know, we're getting ahead of the game for the coming days to make sure that there are no delays or with disappointments with Boss.”

Carriere explains how the workflow and pacing of production has eliminated standard practices like production meetings, and how she has had to adapt and create workarounds in order to perform her job effectively. Production meetings facilitate communication across departments and provide opportunities for department leads to address issues in the script; they also function to get everyone on the same accord. The production team determines meeting frequency, length, and relevant attendees, but it is standard for department heads to meet regularly before and during shooting. As noted by Carriere, there are no production meetings during shooting at Tyler Perry Studios.

According to Mary Cybulski, script supervisor for films like Life of Pi (2012), Syriana (2005), and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), the script supervisor has three tasks: analyze and supervise the script; oversee continuity; and advise the grammar of filmmaking. In

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111 Jennifer Carriere interview, 2021
reference to continuity, she breaks down the task even further into two different categories: matched action and progressive action. Matched action is concerned with assuring all mise-en-scene elements are matching a continuous action within a scene, while progressive action is a logical matching with consideration to the story as well as elapsed time in the script, activity, and so forth. Though it is the responsibility of the script supervisor to ensure and oversee continuity in these ways, in practice each department is typically responsible for their own continuity, since their efficiency and quality of their work relies so heavily on it. At TPS, continuity accuracy is not the ultimate measure of efficiency, quality, or success and its significance is only determined by the script supervisor. This concentrated pressure puts strain on the crew, even as it creates certain opportunities.

On set, Carriere stands next to Perry with the script in her hand, an array of recording devices, a laptop, and mobile desk. She is present in the moment, engaged in the action, and hypervigilant in comparison to other script supervisors who frequently sit quietly near monitors and only respond when spoken to. In addition to assisting actors with their lines, she is the authority on continuity. As mentioned previously, crew members from each department are responsible for watching, keeping, and recording their own continuity. For example, costumers are responsible for the costume’s performance according to its design function. If a character’s sleeve was up during the last scene, it needs to be up for the next scene to maintain continuity, regardless of the shooting order or the production schedule. Props workers might need to reposition a lamp or change a table’s settings between scenes. A hair and makeup assistant may need to reapply lipstick or fix a ponytail. Visual disruptions or discontinuous moments can cause a scene to be re-shot, which results in added costs including additional days/hours of crew members’ labor. To avoid being responsible for increased production expenses, each department
aspires to achieve the highest level of accuracy.

However, the aesthetic standards, production culture, and goals of Tyler Perry Studios productions are different from those of mainstream studios. Therefore, Carriere’s success is due to her job proficiency, speed, flexibility, and creativity. Her role as script supervisor on every TPS project allows her to access all levels of production, which makes her intimately familiar with the Tyler Perry brand. She understands which problems require correction while Perry is simultaneously writing, directing, and producing on set. As writer, director, producer, and studio owner, Perry sometimes re-writes, edits, and/or adjusts the script, the action, the schedule, and/or the location during shooting. He defines productivity as the successful completion of script pages and scenes on schedule. Carriere boosts productivity by anticipating Perry’s impulses, keeping pace, maximizing time, and taking corrective actions during moments of pause.

As a modification to her workflow, Carriere begins preparing for filming each day by checking in with each department prior to shooting. To ensure that everything will be present and available for the day, Carriere visits every department and meets with the person responsible for tracking continuity in each one. Ordinarily, script supervisors show fidelity to the script by tracking continuity, but at TPS Carriere must extend her expertise to eliminating continuity issues before they arise, reflecting fidelity to the crew and their workflow over the script. In the costumes department, I was the key costumer responsible for ensuring continuity one of the shows being produced at a time. When I met with Carriere, we would discuss her expectations for the upcoming shoot day based on what was shot last. This meeting also afforded us both an opportunity to raise any concerns about what might be needed to ensure progress. I would typically share a modified document I created for set costumers to execute their daily duties.
Interestingly, TPS recognized the additional time and labor Carriere expended in the course of her work and credited her as an associate producer on all the shows for which she was script supervisor. Within an improvisational production culture, nipping continuity problems in the bud so that filming proceeds uninterrupted is a key strategy for achieving maximum productivity and profits.

4.2.2.3 CC and Caring for Sound

Given its theatre-like production culture, TPS sound workers also must make significant adjustments and workarounds at times. I interviewed a TPS sound crew member, referred to here as CC; this crew member discussed how his workflow was affected by Perry’s decisions and impulses. Anticipating Perry’s actions allowed CC to maintain his department’s high level of productivity, even when the schedule took unexpected turns. CC says:

> What we did with the sound was interesting because the way he was producing the shows became so quick as you know…. It sort of required us to incorporate like broadcast techniques for sound. [On a] normal movie you have the sound mixer [who] has like a cart that he just pushes around, and he has like an antenna that's usually attached. [There’s] one utility and a boom operator and that's kind of it. But because we were going so fast and Mr. P wanted to move locations or like finish one set and then walk to or like jump on a Segway and by the time he got there on a Segway he wanted to be able to shoot in the next location. That meant we had to like pre-stage equipment. A lot of what we were doing there was really weird and interesting because, you know, we were running fiber optics cable to different parts of the property, you know, we're running these like long ass cables, you know, from the control room, like, all the way to the Maxineville and up through the trees and behind the houses and all this kind of shit. And so like, those are actually some of my most fond memories is like, wrapping that stuff like going and walking behind those, the Maxineville houses. And like, you know, when we started filming, it was like, cold, and the vines were like, shriveled and not covering anything. And then by the time we finish shooting, it's like, summertime, and all the vines have wrapped around these cables. And you know, so it would take a whole day and just like, we pull these cables out of this, you
know, jungle kind of space behind those houses and I always enjoy doing that. It's like very specific but very peaceful, just to go wrap 1000-foot cable by myself, you know. So yeah, and that was a that's what I you know, those are some of the moments that I enjoyed, I think are like, still resonate in terms of the spaces.

CC describes how the improvisational and fast-paced production culture required them to work from the department’s control room in ways that were more like broadcast TV production than film production. Each set had to be wired in a way that would allow for quick and easy setup and transmission to the control department. Decisions around microphones, equipment and technology are determined by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, location, proximity between camera and actor, number of people in a scene, costume, level of nudity, and more. Any alteration in the schedule could result in changes that required different technology to fit the new circumstances. Therefore, the sound team had to have everything available, at all times, to accommodate for sudden changes.

CC’s comments refer to the studio at its Greenbriar location, which was 60 acres and included 5 soundstages. Maxineville was an area of the studio built to resemble a suburban neighborhood, and 34th Street was an area that mimicked a central business district with storefronts, apartments and a theatre façade. The sound department or control room was in one of the 34th Street buildings. To prepare for a new day of filming, the sound team ran wires connecting each shooting location to the control room so that sound could be live-rigged and ready to use in a variety of situations. Essentially, sound crew were wiring a huge expanse as if they were wiring a singular set within a soundstage.

To be an effective sound department, crew members have to be nimble and quick, able to respond to schedule changes at a moment’s notice. Therefore, caring for sound required improvisational methods typically used in live performances, combined with daily spatial
mappings unusual in mainstream production practices. The intense labor required for this level of preparation had its good side, too; amidst the hectic pace were unexpected moments of reflection, joy, and peace. According to CC, by the end of the day, the wires connecting the control room to the various parts of the campus became entangled with the studio’s native flora. The act of pulling up the wires became a daily ritual that offered CC peace and solitude.

4.2.3 Costuming

The costumes department is led by the costume design team, who is responsible for design decisions, and the costumer supervisor, who oversees the department’s logistical operations. The key costumer is the continuity manager; set costumers work on set; and additional costumers work in the department assisting with daily tasks and delivering and retrieving items. All costuming crew members are expected to read and familiarize themselves with the scripts for the shows they’re working on, however different job duties require different levels of engagement with the script. Costumers are expected to have an advanced knowledge of the script because of their continuity responsibilities.

At TPS costuming is executed differently than at mainstream studios. As explained in the previous section on Jennifer Carriere, TPS’s production culture and workflow shifts most of the continuity responsibilities onto Carriere, the script supervisor. Therefore, set costumers are gently encouraged to read the script, but because all continuity responsibilities are consolidated into the work of the key costumer, whose job is executing the design team’s vision in accordance with the production schedule, it is the key costumer who must study and know the script in the greatest detail. The key costumer attunes to the production’s workflow on set and reports on continuity to the script supervisor/executive producer. Therefore, TPS’ costuming practices differ from traditional industry practices in that the main expectation is to keep the camera
rolling; with less emphasis placed on upholding the designer’s vision and fidelity to the script. Within other production cultures, departments have a greater sense of autonomy. While all departments essentially serve the director, the director negotiates the ways he/she will collaborate with departments or manage departmental needs. For Perry, and his production team, as long as the actors have clothes on, they can act, and the cameras can roll.

Set costumers are expected work quickly, to prioritize and meet Perry’s production demands. Ordinarily, set costumers are trained to care for the costumes on set, which involves making minor repairs and recording notes in continuity books, but at TPS, set costumers are called upon to improvise, make time-saving decisions, and remember details for documentation purposes.

Throughout the history of film and television production, costume departments have used different strategies to maintain continuity. Through observation, notation, documentation, script breakdown, and analysis, costumers dress actors accurately; keep continuity across discontinuous shooting schedules; and reproduce any instance of recorded material. At TPS, costume continuity is a direct reflection of the relationship between the script supervisor and the production’s continuity manager, the key costumer. These strategies relate directly to success in the department’s daily functioning, as well as the methods and logic employed for costume storage and preservation. My role as key costumer required that I constantly adapt standard processes and procedures for ultimate productivity.

Continuity books help maintain continuity throughout a production and are submitted to the production department when a show finishes shooting. SyncOnSet, a digital continuity
program introduced around 2012,\textsuperscript{113} has in recent years replaced the analog continuity book; however, by examining pre-SyncOnSet continuity books from shows like \textit{House of Payne}, \textit{Madea’s Big Happy Family}, and \textit{Have and Have Nots}, we can see specific instances of improvisational production culture informing the recordkeeping process.

\textit{House of Payne} (2006) was TPS’ first foray into television production. Continuity details about the show’s first ten episodes are recorded in a costume continuity book labeled “HOP 10 Pilot Episodes.” The book is a white two-inch binder filled with sheets of cardstock. Each sheet contains a grid with columns for recording a character’s name, episode number, change number, scene number, set, and description. Costumers fill in this information and attach a Polaroid picture on the page’s left side, opposite the handwritten description. It is unclear whether this format stemmed from an early version of continuity software (Prosanity) or whether the TPS costume department created it according to its own needs. At the bottom of each Polaroid, the costumer notes character, scene, and date. Sometimes, costumers write continuity notes directly on the photographs, suggesting that the photograph was in the costumer’s possession for a period of time prior to its entry into the continuity book. When they had a free moment, the costumer would affix the image(s) to the appropriate page(s) and transfer all notes to the pages’ description fields. In addition to recording details about the costume such as the type of garment, the brand name, color, size etc. It is also important to note how each item was worn, but in this \textit{House of Payne} continuity book, those details are missing. On many pages, a photo is affixed without any description; other times, a photo is completely absent. These inconsistencies reflect the hectic pace of House of Payne’s production schedule.

Figure 14 snapshot of Tyler Perry’s House of Payne Pilot series costume continuity bookbook
Figure 16 Snapshots of Tyler Perry's Big Happy Family Costume Book 1

Figure 15. Snapshots of Big Happy Family Costume Continuity Books 2
The film *Madea’s Big Happy Family* was released in 2011. The film’s continuity books are separated by gender and feature a combination of photo sleeves as well as costume pages. The 4” by 6” photos illustrate the information recorded on pages that are created by entering script information into Prosanity, a software application commonly used in the costume design world. Using script details, Prosanity generates an individual sheet for each character’s costume changes. A costume change corresponds to the costume worn in a particular scene or across multiple scenes. For example, CALVIN Change 1 is worn in scenes 9-12 on Day 1. This costume continuity book includes more notes on each individual garment, including size and style. It also includes details on how each item was worn or altered. These practices are consistent with industry norms for how costume continuity is tracked. Props, handled by a department distinct from costumes but related because characters occasionally wear props, are also indicated on these continuity sheets.

A 2014 wardrobe continuity book for the TPS show *Tyler Perry’s The Haves & The Have Nots* is spiral-bound and offers a complete report of that show’s costumes. This book does not include scenic information nor how costumes were worn but organizes pictures and information by episode and character. In the front of the booklet, a table of contents directs users to episodes by page number, but characters are not identified here. Within the costume descriptions, full details are listed for each garment, sometimes even including prices, SKU numbers, and the cost of the total outfit. Another irregularity in this book: someone has noted which garments were purchased for the show and which garments were sourced from “stock.” Photographs of the actors wearing the costumes accompany these descriptions.
Figure 17. Snapshot of The Haves and the Have Nots Continuity Book. 2014
Lacking information about how characters used or wore costumes in each scene, this continuity book is not useful for actually maintaining continuity. Its purpose is unclear; the carefully arranged photographs and typed (not handwritten) information give this document the appearance of something final, like a memento or souvenir created someone’s enjoyment.

As we can see in these examples, continuity documentation is highly specific to each production. The continuity book, as the official report of costumes and how they were worn over the course of production, therefore directly reflects the department’s workflow and the work of the key costumer, who is ultimately responsible for a production’s continuity. However, the person in the key costumer role can change during the course of production, due to availability, who the supervisor is, or the designer’s preferences. Although the supervisor hires crew members for each production, the designer can override this decision and bring in someone else to do a job. Therefore, the continuity book also reflects the costume supervisor and the designer, since they select personnel for each job. The continuity book and financial reports are submitted to the production department at the end of filming. In mainstream studios’ costume departments, the continuity book is cleaned up and reissued in a polished, final form. Scribbled notes in these continuity book examples show how at TPS, working drafts are considered finished and are submitted as official reports.
4.2.4 Adapting Software for an Improvisational Production Culture

In 2020, *House of Payne* returned to the small screen, airing on BET. For this production, the costume department began using a digital application called SyncOnSet. SyncOnSet had, at that point, been used by mainstream studios for years, but had not been adopted at TPS until recently. In this section, I will show how TPS adapted its working methods to the SyncOnSet software and adapted the software to its improvisational production culture.

Prior to the invention of any computer-based continuity applications, costume departments would create documentation using a wide variety of methods including drawing, spreadsheets, and filmmaker applications to assist in keeping continuity. Angela Cartwright and Tom McLaren’s book *Styling the Stars: Lost Treasures from the Twentieth Century Fox Archive* is filled with images of actors standing next to chalkboards or holding up signs that contain
scenic information. In the book’s introduction, Cartwright explains how she found the images, dating all the way back to the 1930s, in the form of high-quality negatives stored in the Twentieth Century Fox Photo Archives. She also describes how the occasionally haphazard way in which many of these photographs were made:

The stills would largely consist of an actor standing next to a placard. Upon the placard, the movie title, actor name, character name, and scene number were hastily scribbled down. Some photographs were shot on the fly, with the crew milling about in the background. Sometimes wardrobe personnel would hold the placard while the actor held a cup of steaming coffee or smoked a cigarette on a break during filming. You may notice within these pages some photographs in which the actor is holding a brush, comb, or powder puff. This was merely to designate which department would receive the images once they were developed. If a brush or comb (or sometimes even a broom) was present the image went to hair; if a powder puff was present or the image showed an actor with downturned or closed eyes to reveal nuances of eye makeup, the image went to makeup. A movie such as *Cleopatra* or *Star!* with an inordinate amount of changes would have to be meticulously recorded to prevent errors in hairdos, accessories, makeup, and clothing.\(^{114}\)

These analog documentation practices persisted well into the modern production era.

Finally, in 1998, Betty Besio, a Hollywood-based cutter/fitter in the costume department established Prosanity, a software company that created CPlotPro, the first software application that assisted with costume breakdowns. This software used script information to create formatted documents for individual characters and their corresponding scenes by costume change. In other words, the program made one printable, pre-populated sheet for every instance of a character changing costumes. Once the sheets were printed, costumers could use them like worksheets and add notes and attach pictures for documentation and continuity purposes.

In 2019, Besio announced that CPlotPro version 5 would be the last iteration of the software she would create for the Prosanity. On her website, Besio states, “The digital world changes extremely rapidly and what’s useful today is obsolete tomorrow. Prosanity software will endeavor to keep our skill set up and to keep contributing to the film community. Thanks for the past ten+ years and looking forward to working with you for years to come.”

The success of SyncOnSet coincides with CPlotPro’s demise.

SyncOnSet is a digital application developed by a company based in California. It has revolutionized costuming and is now the industry standard. SyncOnSet consulted with costumers during the design stage so that common user needs and behaviors could “baked into” the application’s interface and functionality. One of the application’s best features is that it works in real time. Set costumers can upload pictures and notes and share them immediately with the rest of their team. Before widespread adoption of SyncOnSet, costumers’ duties involved using a camera to take pictures, printing pictures, carrying binders of Besio’s CPlotPro printouts, writing notes on paper, and notating pictures with markers. Now, SyncOnSet allows costumers to take pictures with their phones, upload pictures into the application, and record notes in real time.

However, to use Sync-on-Set effectively within TPS’ fast-paced production culture, some modifications needed to happen. First, SyncOnSet uses a numbering system to assign each scene a unique identifier, whereas TPS uses an alphabetical system based on ACTS and SCENES. Therefore, in order to adopt SyncOnSet, the studio had to create ways to “marry” these two different naming conventions. Switching between the two systems requires time and focus, two commodities that are scarce in the set costumer’s average workday making it impossible to use. Therefore, the continuity manager would provide a key that would not only enabled the set.

costumers to input costume information and pictures in the appropriate places.

Second, since TPS uses costumers in the office to carry out tasks while set costumers are away on set, these continuity responsibilities would be incorporated into their daywork. Ordinarily, set costumers are responsible for keeping and reporting continuity. At TPS employs hires additional costumers (or promotes production assistants to the level of costumers on heavy days) in order to complete certain tasks. These workers would carry out continuity related tasks taking pictures, writing up descriptions, laundering, etc. relieving set costumers with these tasks and allowing them to focus on caring for the costumes on set and responding to the throes of improvisational production.

Figure 19 Snapshots of to do lists drafted by shady Patterson for costumers. 2020.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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Even though the responsibility of continuity is centralized in continuity managers, as mentioned above, the real-time function of the application still fosters the communication, a sense of space, commitment and trust necessary for success in any production culture, but especially within TPS costumes department. Ultimately, production still relies on departments for continuity when it comes to re-shoots and continuity across seasons. Therefore, the increased pacing and script pages produces an accumulation of details, pictures, and notes to be documented. Without a recording and reporting process matching the speed of production, there is an increased risk of losing information, erasures, and gaps in continuity, creating continuity blunders. Therefore, in order to use sync-on-set, we needed to modify how we work to fit the mold of sync-on-set for increased efficiency.

Examining TPS continuity documentation we see the imprint of the early days of costuming activities. Candid shots of actors with corresponding scenic information in binders or in the Sync on set. Continuity in costuming practices aligns TPS with Hollywood filmmaking practices, but also form the basis for understanding the ways in which TPS had to create shared ways of knowing to accommodate for the pacing in improvisation.

4.2.5 Speed and Improvisation in Post-Production

Improvisational practices might seem problematic, given the need for continuity in filmmaking and television production; however, TPS workers’ have developed their own methods for ensuring continuity despite demanding production schedules. As described in the previous section, crew members work on multiple productions, continuity responsibilities are centralized, and crews create their own workarounds and efficiency strategies. Thus, at TPS the issue of continuity is resolved by adjusting practices and maintaining institutional knowledge. In the next section, I elaborate on how post-production manages improvisational material.
other-worldly imagery, this level of resources allocated to manipulation in post-production is odd and points to the redistribution of resources motivated by pacing and production schedule. In other words, hiring VFX specialists allowed continuity and other live-production issues to be addressed or adjusted during post-production.

What this evidence shows is that increasing the number of post-production workers sped up production. The shorter production time resulted in a significantly lower overall cost of production. Instead of re-shooting scenes and having to pay cast and crew for additional time, the post-production department was tasked with cleaning up any mistakes. This strategy, to rely on a large post-production crew to increase speed and reduce production costs, is discordant with standard industry practices. Although this new practice allows TPS to film a sitcom season in a much shorter amount of time, it also created new meaning for the oft-heard phrase “Fix it in post.”

Examining these crew lists reveals another TPS personnel-leveraging strategy. In the 2015 HHN:LTN crew list, 3 out of 9 members of the “Editorial/Post” department have email addresses that end in “@andaction.com.” This detail reveals that they work for the production company And Action, LLC, a TPS offshoot. In the 2019 BRUH crew list, 22 out of 35 crew members have either @andactionll.com or @tylerperrystudios.com email addresses. This increase reflects the studio’s position on the value of editing professionals. It also explains the department’s renaming to “TPS Post Production,” which reflects the move to work with more permanently hired employees rather than temporarily contracted employee.

The 2019 crew list for the TPS television show BRUH is a 16-page file that documents one of the first productions shot at TPS’ Fort McPherson campus. There is an alphabetical organization to the Table of Contents, with one notable exception: “TPS Post Production”
appears out of order, between “Craft Services” and “Electric,” although the page number sequence follows normal numerical order.

Comparing BRUH’s crew list to the crew list for the 2015 show Tyler Perry’s The Haves & The Have Nots: Love Thy Neighbor, we find “Editorial/Post” in the table of contents, accurately placed alphabetically after “Craft services” and before “Electric.” This placement is identical to “TPS Post Production” in the BRUH crew list, suggesting that the department’s title changed from “Editorial/Post” to “TPS Post Production” sometime between 2015 and 2019. This title change reflects a larger organizational change in how the department is constituted within TPS.

In 2015, 22 episodes of HHN:LTN were shot at TPS’ Greenbriar campus over the course of 17 days. The crew list for that shoot lists 8 members in the Editorial/Post department. Later, in 2019, 24 episodes of BRUH were shot at TPS’s Fort McPherson campus in just 7 days. The Editorial/TPS Post Production department expanded from 8 people to a team of 35, with 9 people working specifically in visual effects (VFX). For a television sitcom absent of fantastical or
Figure 21. Screen grab of digital crew list for Bruh, 2019.
4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored TPS’ production culture through internal working documents and one-on-one interviews. These deeply embedded texts reveal a style of working that is rooted in theatre, taking that art form’s improvisational methods and using them to create innovative, highly efficient ways of producing film and television content. As described in the sections above modifications are made in relation to workflow, and can be seen in how professionals produce creative workarounds, while remaining typically invisible or under the radar of the production. While these documents may look random, highly personalized, haphazard, and nearly indecipherable, it is just that makes it evidence of improvisation and valuable archival material that foregrounds the performance of Black creative bodies. These high skilled and adept crew members who are fully immersed within the production culture and think of themselves as only doing what needs to be done to meet the standards of their role. Their practices resists the pressures of the improvisational drive which encourages the minimum in order to move forward. Instead these industry professionals imagine and employ creative methods to meet the expectations of their job description.
In 1995-96 Carrie Mae Weems produced From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried using daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans found in the Harvard University Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. As standard practice, when Weems made copies of these images she promised not to use them without prior authorization from Harvard, however Weems used these images in her art series to address the ways photography has shaped and supported racism and social injustice. Famously, Harvard threatened to sue Weems for using the images without authorization, which they later rescinded. The discussion produced much debate around Harvard’s right to own and profit from material unjustly acquired. This debate shows how epistemological origins of archival science are rooted in discriminatory discourses and the inequalities in who has the authority to control, canonize, and catalog the archive. Therefore, archiving necessitates an awareness and acknowledgment of practices of bias, exclusion, and racism as embedded in the discipline and practice.

In 2021, I formed The Radical Archive of Preservation (T.R.A.P.) as an approach to preserving Black production culture based on my research in this dissertation. It is sensitive to the social and political issues facing Black communities and considers how the company adapts and manages these issues as an integral part of the work of the production culture. I extend John Caldwell’s idea of production culture to describe communities of workers producing artistic material on untraditional platforms and in alternative spaces. I understand improvisation, as offered by Fred Moten and scholars of the Black Radical Tradition, as the articulation of Blackness through performative action. In other words, improvisation describes the way Black people move as a result of structures of racism embedded in American life. By identifying points of discordance, archivists are able to capture the radical ways the production culture works and produces content. As an archivist, the aim is trace and produce traces of these radical practices that define
their unique practice. Therefore, T.R.A.P. identifies points of discordance to capture improvisation as documents, or traces, of Black production culture.

This approach can be used by any archival professional or non-professional interested in preserving the work of any Black production culture. However, the method demands a set of commitments to social justice, diversity, and inclusion of all performative bodies and materials within the production culture. Since production cultures are made up of a rich and diverse community of makers that embody shared ancestral knowledge, the archivist should not limit their work to surviving physical materials. Black communities create ways of navigating social and political issues stemming from racism, economic and gender discrimination that are uniquely tied to place, spirituality, and imagination. Therefore, in order for one to perceive unique production practices one needs to be positioned within the flow of information. When looking closely, we can see the ways these strategies define their work. For example, as presented in this dissertation Tyler Perry Studios starts each production day with prayer before shooting. This production practice acknowledges the space as cultivated by the presence and will of God, which positions workers within a milieu that understands obstacles as an expected part of production. Prayer is one of the most consistent practices at the studio acts as the basis for all work in a production day, however it does not have a material basis and therefore resists the archive.

Secondly, the archivist should design the preservation program in alignment with current production processes. Black production cultures are living archives. Since Black performance communities are improvisational in nature, the material produced by a black production culture may appear ephemeral to those outside of the flow of information. Therefore, the preservation program not only needs to make space for immaterial remains, rituals, and/or embodied knowledge in the archive, but also must be creative in its strategies to capture what cannot be preserved physically. To be clear, T.R.A.P. is conceptualized as an approach for preserving living and working production cultures, so archivists using a
TRAP method should be involved in and aware of daily activities associated with the creative and production arms of the company in order to establish a system for the permanent records of the company.

The archivist should aspire to be recognized as a part of that community. The archivist’s familiarity with production processes will directly inform how material is valued in the community and by extension, in the archive.. For this project, continuity books alone possess great documentary value because it reveals a lot about how continuity is kept in this department, but even more meaningful is how this production adapts industry practices to improvisational production. This unique set of practices can only be captured using a variety of methods including object analysis, interviews, and direct observation.

Lastly, the archivist should think of themselves as a performing body, a collaborating artist, and understand the archive as a conceptual work of art. Departing from traditional preservation practices which positions the archivist as an objective steward of the legacy of the company, the archivist is an artist and collaborator of the company. Therefore, it is important for the archivist to keep a journal of their own thoughts, experiences, activities while working to establish the archive since the archive will be a work of art produced while in residency with the company. David Thomson, a collaborative interdisciplinary artist developed the Trisha Brown Archive database after working as a dancer with the company. The Trisha Brown Archive database is not accessible to the public, but to company members and to researchers by request. Thomson used Filemaker pro to develop a database for Trisha Brown Dance Company’s ephemeral materials and practices

5.1 An Archive for Community’s Sake: A performance-based, archival practice

The Radical Archive of Performance (T.R.A.P.) is a company I established in 2021 that offers preservation services for private individuals, companies, and organizations. Drawing on my dissertation research, this company offers services in archival performance; material
organization and cataloging; repository preparation; consultation, and exhibition curation. My work and research at Tyler Perry Studios served as the building blocks of this company which helped identify the key themes working at the foundation of my methodology. These themes are improvisation, discordance, and trace. As part of the company’s debut, I worked with local community members to explore these concepts as an introduction of T.R.A.P. to the Atlanta community. These projects specifically focused on Black feminist practices in Atlanta. Not only did we work with a diverse community of professionals specializing in themes central to Black women’s experiences in Atlanta. We documented these as Black feminist praxis and approached the Black female body as the archive. Through performance and production with local community members I explored the performance mode of improvisation through an original production of BRASS WIND HOT TONGUES presented at T. Lang’s The Movement Lab in September 2021. I examined forms of discordance through a performance installation called, Washing Our Mothers part of Atlanta’s ELEVATE project. Lastly, I investigated strands of trace through a solo performance called, WITNESS: Pearl commissioned by 7 Stages Theatre as part of their Curious Futures Encounters Festival.

As a performance archivist, I am interested in the ways bodies make meaning through physical and sonic encounters with others; how we perform against the standard and forms of norms; and how this activity traces alternate histories. I aim to show how we can make this embodied knowledge available to a general audience and researchers through strategies of archival processing. Fred Moten describes Black performance as the work of the ensemble. It is a set of social, sensual, and sensory arrangements constituting Blackness and Black history. Moten describes Blackness as improvisation. Blackness as a sociality is a way of creating, informed by certain racialized experiences of objecthood affording an attunement of spirit. Black
performance is the effect of creative decisions made at the intersection of embodied knowledge, experiences of subjectivity and objectivity within and always in response to constraints of institutional standards.

5.2 Reflections on Improvisation in T.R.A.P.

In the chapter on improvisation, I presented material acquired through analysis of internal working documents and one-on-one interviews. I intended to show how deeply embedded texts reveal a style of working that is rooted in theatre, taking that art form’s improvisational methods and using them to create innovative, highly efficient ways of producing film and television content. As described in the chapter, modifications are made in relation to workflow, and can be seen in how professionals produce creative workarounds, while remaining typically invisible or under the radar of the production. These are deployed by high skilled and adept crew members who are fully immersed within the production culture and think of themselves as only doing what needs to be done to meet the standards of their role. In interviews with TPS crew, Derron Cherry, CC, and Jennifer Carriere, reveal how the increased pacing of production created opportunities of creativity and resulted in workaround methods that reflected their own unique creative practice. Being highly adept at improvising within this community allows one to forge pathways to success and advancement. These industry professionals imagine and employ creative methods (i.e. unorthodox shopping and accounting strategies in the costumes department; television broadcasting techniques in sound operations; and unconventional continuity procedures in script management) to meet the expectations of their job description. While the documents may look haphazard and nearly indecipherable, it is exactly that which points to the improvisational nature of the environment and thus valuable archival material that foregrounds the performance of Black creative bodies.
As described in the preceding chapters, improvisation is a relational aesthetics found at TPS. T.R.A.P.’s BRASS WIND HOT TONGUES embodies improvisational production culture; explores the sensual excesses of Black femininity; and produces a wealth of archival material. I worked with 4 female dancers and 5 male musicians. The dancers and musicians were professionally trained and working artists. Each participant was asked to keep journals and completed post-production interviews to supplement the photographic and other documentary materials collected throughout the process.

Similar to TPS, we had 1 scheduled rehearsal and 1 scheduled show. I started on the floor in the center of the room. The effect was seeing a Black woman lying on her back pushing her body counterclockwise around the room. I was activating the space. I was training the gaze of the audience to focus on the center and the areas my body moved. Like Pope L.’s New York City crawls, my body, sweat, and process invited the audience to think about the emotional, physical, and mental labor involved in being Black woman, even if this was just one Black woman, a performance, and a solitary moment in time.

I do not know how long I performed the rotations, but I was hot and sweaty when T. Lang, the artistic director and choreographer handed me the microphone. The microphone was introduced into the performance after everyone was seated, quiet, and focused on my body in the center. I said these words in a particular order and then diverged when I recognized new patterns and associations between the words, concepts, and sounds. I quoted Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and Thomas DeFrantz from notes taken in my first Black Performance theory class with Professor Tavia Nyongo. I continued to move in a circular motion in the middle of the floor. Kebbie Williams entered the circle, following above me and playing a flute. My words became entangled with his notes forming a new rhythm, a new song. Dancers entered the space and
positioned themselves in two lines extending from one corner of the room. Then I made my way between the configuration of bodies and a musician in a corner of the room. I slid between the bodies and propped myself up against the box used as a footstool by the musician.

Throughout the piece, musicians and dancers joined the performance in different areas of the space. We used different movement and sonic phrases to make meaning during the performance. As the speaker, I used scatting, stuttering, laughing, screeching, low tones, and repetition to encode the text with auditory ruptures to reflect the emotional labor buttressing the words which created accents for jazz dance movements. Like Abbey Lincoln’s screeching in “Protest” song with Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr. we were able to tap into the emotional chamber of the audience. The place that attaches meaning to sound.
The Summer of Peace and Shade

The sun was heating the streets
Pushing the heat inside out
My tolerance for the humidity was slowly waning, though if touched by the right one it might bring a cool breeze but the one touching was on me, kissing my lips with the strong, masculine, blessed and endearing E. Alexis. He was nice but suspicious, consistent but secretive but all and all I was there and he identified as my boyfriend. This summer I am 30 years old. Things are changing for me.

Maybe a safe, consistent man who surprises...
Figure 23. snapshot of rehearsal with movers, musicians, and crew.

Figure 24. snapshot of rehearsal with Kebbie Williams (flute), Zack Buersmeyer (tuba), and shady Radical. Photographed by videographer, Colbie Fray.
Figure 25. Diagram of stage layout.

Figure 26. Screenshot of Set Designer, Olamma Oparah's Instagram post referencing Dikenga chart used in designing choreography and staging.
Figure 27. Screenshot of musician, Kebbie William's notebook.
Figure 28. copy of Olamma Oparah's T.R.A.P. post-production questionnaire.
5.3 Reflections on Discordance in T.R.A.P.

In Black Marxism, Cedric Robinson describes tracing historical discordances as radical acts; forms of resistance; and the basis of The Black Radical Tradition (BRT). BRT claims resistance as the basis of creativity in Black culture within capitalist modes of production. The
immaterial basis of this cultural artifact creates issues of preservation using standard archival science methods. Therefore, in this research project, I extend Robinson’s ideas of discordance to the workings of Black production culture as distinct from Hollywood film and television production. This approach helps us see how companies are limited in the preservation of their culture. Tyler Perry Studios has served as the entry point to the film and television industry for many of its employees. However, in an industry that is already very competitive, the desirability to stand out and conform to improvisational work requirements is even greater. Tyler Perry Studio jobs are highly coveted jobs in the local Black community. As we will see in the next section, hiring practices and advancement have distinct practices from the industry. Ironically, this competitive environment is less tied to standard pressures within the media industry, but rather because of a discordance within the industry’s infrastructure that creates opportunities and obstacles for Black creative professionals.

In the chapter on discordance, I found discordances in company structure, historical narrative, and production practices in relation to mainstream Hollywood production. I examined the company website; the special feature section of stageplay DVDs; and Tyler Perry’s blogposts for moments of discordance. For example, the history of Fort McPherson was described in relation to racialized narratives associated with Fort McPherson. Instead of ignoring this questionable activities, the company uses it to reframe the identity of the company as working against and conquering plots to impede the success of Black people.

T.R.A.P., the company, explored discordance through an archival performance of *Washing Our Mothers*, a performance and installation presented at Day/Night Gallery part of City of Atlanta’s ELEVATE Festival. *Washing Our Mothers* was a collaboration between performance archivist, shady Radical; cinematographer, Colbie Fray, film director, Olamma
Oparah, sound artist, Shanti Om; poet, Victoria Allen; and choreographer, Kerri Garrett. In 2020, filmmakers Olamma Oparah and Colbie Fray released *Laundry Day* a short film about generational trauma, motherhood, and ritual. This film inspired our collaborative project, *Washing Our Mothers*, which further explored the relationship between Black mothers and daughters. It included a visual installation of letters to mothers on large and small pieces of fabric, portraits of the collaborators with their mothers, and a dynamic audiovisual performance in which the poem used in the film was read aloud, movement capturing a range of symbolic ideas collected over the course of production; and body as a site of resistance articulating how the black body processes the range of emotions found in the letters. The repetitive movements, groans, screeches, bare skin, and washing of letters produced a space commonly found in ritual. The paradox of mother love and mother grievance captured how discordance lives in and is processed through the body. In the film and the live performance, women are washing fabric to symbolize the will and desire to unburden oneself from the pain passed along from mothers to daughters. Laundry, symbolizing woman’s work, captures that which persists and must be dealt with in the lives of women. The program was made available to children of all ages and invited the audience to participate by writing letters to their mothers. In addition, following the program, a therapy session led by Sistercare Alliance offered space and tools for managing generational trauma. By relying upon and sharing embodied knowledge in this way, the participants offered strategies of healing and spaces of belonging.
Figure 29. Snapshot of exhibition installation. Photograph by Jessica Thomas.

Figure 30. Snapshot of archival materials in exhibition installation. Photographed by Jessica Thomas.
Figure 31. snapshot of performance. Photographed by Jessica Thomas.

Figure 32 snapshot of performance. Photographed by Jessica Thomas.
Figure 33. snapshot of T.R.A.P. library installed at Washing Our Mothers Exhibition and Performance program. Photographed by Jessica Thomas.
5.4 Reflections on *Trace* in T.R.A.P.

In “The Footprint and the Stepping Foot” Kimberley Anderson urges archivists to consider internal structures embedded in communities before attempting to adapt material to fit traditional models of preservation. One strategy she proposes is to look at the way communities intentionally preserve their cultural material. Traditional/Western archives prioritize objectivity as a measurement for a record’s evidentiary value. Material that has survived its primary administrative function is considered more truthful and valid, as it was created prior to influences that could affect the record and/or memory making process. However, tracing Black performance preservation practices requires a different approach since the cultural material is embodied and resistant to material preservation. Therefore, I use Radical Presence, an exhibition on the work of Black performance artists as a model for thinking about how resistant material is captured, preserved and exhibited.

In the chapter on trace, I present ways artists encounter, perform, preserve, and present resistance in an exhibition as a model for how Black performance and production cultures, more specifically Tyler Perry Studios capture and preserve or in other words trace alternate histories. In the first section, I show how the curator, Valerie Cassel Oliver presents the work of living contemporary artists in order to produce a history or genealogy of Black performance art previously undocumented. The majority of the artworks are acquired directly from the participating artists exposing the lack of archival repositories available for the work of this community. Largely, audiovisual, Oliver also presents costumes, instruments, conceptual games, and live performances in this exhibit. Oliver looks at current practices, photographic documentation, and ephemeral performances as the material in her exhibition.

Following Oliver, I looked in both common and unconventional places for examples of
production and preservation practices. For example, TPS’s soundstages commemorate individuals by naming each space after an artist. While this is a common practice in Hollywood, the names of these individuals reflect Black life, culture, and art in a way that is surprising and meaningful to artists who visit and work in the space. Kerri Washington is quoted remarking on how different it feels and rare it is to be in a place where your people are on the names of the building. I also look at TPS’s unique marketing strategy that engages with popular culture by producing parody posters of popular films for upcoming productions. Perry uses his body to critically engage the public, but also in jest consistent with the comedic nature of the productions. These parody posters use cultural mining and satire to insert TPS into the cultural memory of the nation, but also preserves practices of resistance, or what Saidiya Hartman calls, “black radical practices” that address absences in the historical record.

WITNESS: Pearl was commissioned by 7 Stages Theatre for their Curious Futures Encounters program. For this archival performance, T.R.A.P. collaborators visited Georgia State University Archives; Atlanta History Center; the archives at Emory University; and 7 Stages on-site historical materials. From this collection process, we gathered material related to two performances staged at 7 Stages Theatre in 1982 and 2006 written and directed by Pearl Cleage. Cleage is a living playwright and author and is currently in residence at Alliance Theatre. This project wanted to explore aspects of trace through objects, spaces, and rituals. T.R.A.P. designed 2 10-minute performances in the dressing room behind the main stage.

WITNESS: Peal was inspired by Cleage’s stageplays Love & Trouble and A Song for Coretta. These performance re-imagined the moments before the original performance in the same spaces occupied by the cast, crew, and playwright. I used voiceovers and excerpts from Cleage’s published journal entries; archival material found in the archives; and objects found in photography
from the original production. This project intended to memorialize, commemorate and provide
access to the energetic and physical spaces previously used by important Atlanta-based artists, but
also to find new ways of engaging with material that has provided a ground for the work of
contemporary artists today. By exploring this material and making it accessible to the public,
T.R.A.P created a living archive which made historical materials free and accessible. This project
was activated ideas of trace discovered through the dissertation research project and also attempted
practice, Saidiya Hartman’s method of critical fabulation, the act of combining historical materials
with imagination to engage with the past. Radical performed some of the pre-show rituals and
included objects that were symbolic to this performance. This performance informed how I
approached the object, spaces, and rituals of Tyler Perry Studios.
Figure 34 snapshot of archival materials found in Pearl Cleage Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University
Figure 35 Snapshot of archival materials found in 7 Stages Collection, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library.
Figure 36. Photograph of performance archivist, shady Radical in front of dramaturgy wall full of copies of archival material from Georgia State University, Emory University, and 7 Stages Theater archives.

Figure 37. Photograph of dramaturgy wall, T.R.A.P. library, and visitor's log.
Figure 38 photograph of performance archivist, shady Radical in A Song for Coretta. Photographed by photographer, Colbie Fray.

Figure 39 promotional material for WITNESS: Pearl.
5.5 Final Thoughts

The archival community in general has been working hard to create strategies of service that support fair, just, and accessible research experiences. With anti-oppressive language working groups, reparative description practices, creation of oral history collections and community training workshops archivists are constantly working on new ways to make history more accessible. Through this project and my research on performance preservation, I found there is still more work to be done to center embodied knowledge in the work. Through continued work with The Radical Archive of Preservation I aim to capture and share practices of resistance that are considered valuable and important to Black communities and culture. T.R.A.P. demonstrates a way of archiving this practice that reflects the black production culture by foregrounding performance.
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