Speculating Ancestor(ie)s: The Cavernous Memory of White Innocence and Fluid Embodiments of Afrofuturist Memory-Work

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Abstract: Enduring legacies of racial violence signal the need to reconcile with the past. This paper comparatively explores various speculative works that either reinforce a paradigm of White innocence that serves to deny such legacies or center critical dialogue between the past and present. It draws on a range of theoretical works, including Seshadri-Crooks's (2002) Lacanian analysis of race, Taylor's (2003) notion of the body as repertoire for embodied knowledge, Wright's (2015) concept of Black epiphenomenal time, and Hartman's (2008b) method of 'critical fabulation.' Through an analysis of the narrative tropes of caves and mirrors in the *Star Wars* Skywalker saga (1977–83; 2015–2019), this paper firstly unpacks the bounded individualism that permits protagonists Luke and Rey Skywalker to refute their evil Sith lord ancestry and prevail as heroes. It then turns to the works *Black Panther* (2018) and *Watchmen* (2019) to comparatively examine Afrofuturist narrative strategies of collectivity, embodiment, and non-linear temporality that destabilize bounded notions of self and time to reckon with the complexities of the past. It concludes that speculative approaches to ancestral (dis)connections are indicative of epistemological frameworks that can either circumvent or forefront ongoing demands to grapple with the past.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; mirror stage; embodiment; ancestors; memory; white innocence; speculative culture; Star Wars; Black Panther; Watchmen

1. Introduction

Race in the contemporary context is undetachable from history. As Fields and Fields (2012) argue, racial ideology from the past has been recrafted again and again to remain contemporary and pervasive, at the same time that the contemporary evades such history. Increasingly, scholars are showing how current systemic inequalities and injustices—such as police brutality and hyper-incarceration—are inextricably rooted in practices, discourses, and institutions initiated during previous periods of colonialism, slavery, and segregation (Fountain 2018; Spruill 2016; Alexander 2012; Muhammad 2011). Powell (2016, 2014), Shepherd (2013), and Gordon (2008) go further by compellingly proposing 'haunting' rather than 'history' as an analytic for understanding the continued presence of the (so-called) past. In Gordon's words, confronting the debts of the long history of race "is not a return to the past, but a reckoning with its repression in the present" (Gordon 2008, p. 184). Building on Toni Morrison's concept of 'rememory'—or the experience of pasts through present bodies—both Powell (2014) and Gordon (2008) then frame the past as not just context nor foundation, but as "animated worldliness" (Gordon 2008, p. 166) that continually holds gripping demands on the current moment and on the racialized body. Perhaps from a different angle, Saidiya Hartman (2008a) terms the contemporary as the 'afterlife of slavery', positioning the present as an extension of the past, as the latter relentlessly continues to configure racialized identities and lives. These scholars all signal a deeply intimate and intricate relationship between the past and the present.

Insofar as race is inexorably speculative (Fields and Fields 2014), then, it necessarily involves (re)imaginings of the past and of the meanings history holds (or lacks) for the present.

Several scholars have proposed strategies for doing this necessary work of remembering the past. Lipsitz (1990) suggested 'counter-memory' as the practice of intentionally forging revisions of history, particularly through the perspectives and mythic imaginations of communities experiencing ongoing oppressions. Similarly, through her readings of Zoë Wicomb's novels that connect imagined pasts with the current world, Gqola (2010) suggests a 'helix-shaped' process that mobilizes memory backwards and forwards to constantly re-examine itself and foreground the relationality between imagined pasts and present subjectivities. Isoke (2018) considers this looping of time in backward and forward motions as a liberating praxis that recognizes Black lived time as that "in which the past, present, and future are coiled around each other" (p. 149), an important insight which we will revisit more closely later. Important to highlight from these models of memory-work is that they destabilize notions of time as linear, while also positing that history itself is neither static nor transparent. The movement backwards, in other words, is fundamentally suspicious of what the past can offer because a plethora of gaps and silences inundate the histories of racialized groups.

Hartman (2008b) best captures this limitation in approaching (or recovering) history through her reading of the archive as a sort of "mortuary" and "open casket," whereby certain historical figures—namely the enslaved—have undergone erasures and theft of voice. However, for Hartman (2008b), it is ethically important to exercise a "narrative restraint" (p. 12) that does not necessarily seek to fill in these gaps, as that would place yet further (violent) demands upon the dead to, once again, "be made useful or instructive" (p. 14)—but rather practices what she terms "critical fabulation." By this, she suggests a process of "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story," re-sequencing a series of events through newly "divergent [… and] contested points of views," thereby displacing the authorized chronological account that first lead to the silencing of the [racialized] figures in question. A speculative approach, this critical fabulation is especially critical of closure, producing less of a finite ending and more of an open-ended dialogue that reestablishes an ever-embracing relationship between the past, the present, and an imagined future that is finally liberated. This critical fabulation speaks to an undoing of what the Fieldses (2012) have termed "racecraft," the mythical occult science that weaves together the illusion of race and its practical forms of racism. Racecraft (Fields and Fields 2012) carefully pieces together a magical thinking that allows one to deduce racial essences out of mere everyday circumstances and, as such, directs the imagination to fill in the unknown with preconceived racial meanings. Critical fabulation directs imagination in the opposite direction, divesting us from totalizing narratives to instead respect the limits of knowledge, the gaps of memory, and even the unknowability of the past.

At an opposing end to Hartman's (2008a) model of approaching history through the weaving of archival research with personal experiences is, then, the notion of the archive and of the past as finite and enclosed. The latter is a tradition that Derrida and Prenowitz (2015) pinpoint as the Western framework for memory. Through his deconstruction of the term 'archive' as denoting authority—as home of the archon—Derrida (Derrida and Prenowitz 2015) unsparingly shows how Western memory is one that fundamentally delineates and organizes history, obsessively determining what is remembered (i.e., housed within the archive) and what is forgotten (i.e., excluded from such authorized and localized site). Indeed, this is the epistemological framework that allows for what Gloria Wekker (2016) identifies as a prevailing paradigm of White innocence anchored by an "epistemology of ignorance" (p. 17). In her analysis of Dutch identity and memory, Wekker (2016) reveals the contradictory yet functional aspirations of Whiteness as it actively reframes history and determines what and how to remember the past in ways that allow White communities to deny colonial and racist legacies. This paradigm of White innocence postulates a commitment to an imagined nonracialism but only through ahistorical accounts of the past that carefully and strategically avoid the violence and oppressive events that would place (not undue) responsibility on White communities to reconcile injustices committed against colonized peoples. This framework for remembering is, therefore, tied to strategic acts of forgetting.

It is this particular paradigm that I will trace within the *Star Wars* lore. I argue that this is especially relevant as it is indicative of broader phenomena in the current racial context. For example, what should we make of Rey assuming the Skywalker surname at the end of *Rise of Skywalker* (2019), as it coincides with growing trends by institutions to rebrand themselves through symbolic removals of names of White figures revealed to be deeply racist (Pietsch 2020; Watanabe and Mier 2020; Galindo 2020; Durkin 2019)? By extension, does it relate to the phenomenon of modern Black-facing, where White individuals are being exposed in their meticulous attempts to erase traces of their Whiteness behind a veil of feigned Blackness (e.g., Rachel Dolezal; Jessica Krug; etc.) (Harriot 2020)? Is there, in other words, a more fundamental epistemology that connects these various phenomena, one that is traceable through Rey's final utterance?

The following paper will comparatively explore the memory-work at play within the speculative logics of select recent popular speculative films and television series, interrogating the structure of the White innocence paradigm (Wekker 2016) in two of the three *Star Wars* Skywalker Saga trilogies and unpacking Afrofuturist critical approaches to temporality. It focuses on the motif of ancestry across these works, closely analyzing scenes and narrative arcs related to protagonists' respective (dis)engagements with their parentage and forefathers. A brief disclaimer is necessary. The focus on 'the ancestral' is not meant to reinforce conflations between biologically and historically formed racial identities, conflations that are increasingly underpinning what Zimitri Erasmus (2013) calls "a renewed biological imaginary of race," in which genetically traced origins are gradually marking social identifications with an alleged authenticity that should rather, Erasmus argues, be located in history, language, music, ritual, and social practices (p. 40). The Fieldses (2012) also note this renewed scientific imaginary that reduces ancestry to race through their poignant discussion of the underlying discourse of genetic descent within the supposedly liberal notions of the multi-racial and multi-cultural which, in turn, imply racial purity. In other words, the focus on ancestral connections, here, does not suggest that race is primarily (or otherwise) a genetic fact; as discussed earlier in the introduction, race is found within broader constructed historical and social narratives that frame meanings of imagined racial belongings and differences. The 'ancestral' is, rather, understood as a metonymic site within the mythologies of speculative fiction through which broader imaginings of history take place and are symbolically narrated.

The first section looks at the role of caves and mirrors in two of the *Star Wars* Skywalker saga trilogies (1977–1983; 2015–2019; *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* 1977; *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* 1980; *Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi* 1983; *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens* 2015; *Star Wars: Episode IX—The Rise of Skywalker* 2019), building specifically on Heidegger's ([1940] 1998) reading of Plato's cave analogy and Seshadri-Crooks's (2002) Lacanian analysis of race and the mirror stage to argue that their narratives can be framed as allegories for White innocence. Following is a comparative look at cave scenes in *Black Panther* (2018), focusing on the contrasting role of embodiment (in place of mirrors) and collectivity (as opposed to individuality). The final section explores HBO's *Watchmen* series (2019), particularly as it touches on two of these themes—mirrors and embodiment—in ways that are undergirded by non-linear epistemologies of time. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research based on the findings of this paper.

2. Dis/Connecting with the Ancestral in Speculative Films and Television Series

2.1. Cavernous Memory

By point of entry, I wish to first note that an interesting trope of caves spans numerous speculative works of fantasy and science film and television, beyond those studied here. Due to the limited scope of this paper, the focus will be kept to cave scenes from *Star Wars*' episodes V and VIII, *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Last Jedi* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018). However, it is worth noting that caves and caverns serve as important sites where the past and present meet in various other popular works. These include, for example: *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), as Aragorn descends into caverns to meet the Army of the Dead; *Game of Thrones* (2014 & 2016) and its "cave of the three-eyed raven," where Bran gains the ability to see into

the past of his own relatives and others; and, of course, *Dark* (2017) which uses a cavernous system beneath a nuclear power plant as the location of a wormhole through which to travel through time. This does not suggest that the following analysis into the cave scenes from *Star Wars* holds true for these other works. Such comparisons and connections require further research into the uses of caves across and within such works. For now, I wish to highlight the extent of this trope to simply suggest and contextualize the broader relevance the following investigation might hold for revisiting other speculative works.

Of Caves and Mirrors in Star Wars

In *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Luke Skywalker travels to the remote planet Dagobah to train with the Jedi master, Yoda. The elder tasks Luke with entering the "Dark Side Cave", where he confronts the dark side of the force as Darth Vader incarnate and, in the process, confronts his own possible fate. In *The Last Jedi* (2017), Rey similarly travels to the remote planet Ach-To, in search of Luke's help against the newly risen First Order (itself, a continuation of the evil Galactic Empire Luke was fighting). Against Luke's command, Rey enters a similar cave (henceforth referred to as the "Mirror Cave") that also possesses a strong connection to the dark side of the force. Tate (2018) draws comparisons between these scenes: "the whole sequence on Ahch-To is an echo of the sojourn on Dagobah in *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (1980): in both cases, the aspiring student is rebuffed by a disillusioned, somewhat irritable [Jedi master] who seems deeply unhappy to be found," (p. 18) hiding in close proximity to the darkest of caves, no less. In each of these cave scenes, Luke and Rey search for answers to introspective question about their identities and belonging.

To begin an analysis of caves is to first recognize their central role within Western thought ever since Plato first offered his famous cave allegory. Summarized briefly, Plato likens us to prisoners trapped in a cave, only able to stare at one wall while a fire burns behind us. Between the fire and the average person are puppeteers who cast shadows and echoes, which the people, in turn, come to assume as the world of reality and truth. Through the allegory, Plato postulated a world of "forms" that exists beyond (and as a source of) the realm of human ideas. Our ideas, in short, are shadows of higher truths. For Plato, philosophy serves to take us beyond the cave of flickering shadows to see the blinding sun, which symbolizes the purest form of Truth. A useful illustration is provided by Warmington and Rouse (1999, p. 316).

We might be tempted to discount Plato's cave allegory as irrelevant to the cave scenes described above, as they appear contradictory to Plato's movement out of the cave with Luke and Rey both entering *into* caves to search for their own truths. The reversal of this movement does not, however, signal a reversal of the Platonic philosophy of truth. Here, we turn to Heidegger's ([1940] 1998) reading of Plato, as he shows us that the cave allegory, more fundamentally, is about the Western framework for "truth" as the correctness of the gaze's orientation:

> "The movement of passage from one place to the other consists in the process whereby the gaze becomes more correct. Everything depends on the correctness of the gaze. Through this correctness, seeing or knowing becomes something correct so that in the end it looks directly at the highest idea and fixes itself in this 'direct alignment'. In so directing itself, apprehending conforms itself to what is to be seen: the 'visible form' of the being". (Heidegger [1940] 1998, p. 177)

Truth, in other words, becomes the gaze itself, the "correctness" of the gaze's orientation toward a "thing" (in this case, the connection between the self and the past). What is determined to be truthful about Luke and Rey's past becomes a predetermined reality that requires them to adjust their self-perceptions so as to be seen correctly. The cavernous scenes described above attest to this emphasis on the gaze and its orientation, as the characters' arcs become less about an unhiddenness of the characters' ancestry and more about their *journey* to see themselves in the correct light. Prior to entering the cave, Luke is told by Yoda that the cave consists of "only what you take with you," and he famously confronts first the shadow Darth Vader, followed by his own image reflecting back to

him from within Vader's helmet. Directly asking about the truth of her parents, Rey is faced with an array of endless mirrors and then confronted by a looming shadow that ultimately turns out to be her own image. The emphasis in both cases is a gaze which perceives, firstly, a shadow, which then morphs into a mirror reflection of self. Following Heidegger, we can interpret this transition between shadow and the image behind the shadow as the Platonic movement that positions the latter as Truth in the highest sense. The mirror image of a self that is singular, coherent, and contained is, therefore, positioned as an unequivocal answer to a self-exploration conflicted (perhaps more so in Luke's case) or troubled (in Rey's) by a problematic family lineage.

Later on in each film trilogy, Rey and Luke ultimately discover that they each come from a lineage of Sith Lords. In *Rise of Skywalker* (2019), Rey is revealed to be a descendant of Emperor Palpatine. As foreshadowed by Luke's cave confrontation with Darth Vader, in *Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Darth Vader utters one of the most iconic lines in cinematic history, proclaiming his fatherhood and prompting Luke into a descent, both literally as he falls from a ledge and psychologically as he despairs this revelation. In Rey's own version of this revelation in *Rise of Skywalker* (2019), Kylo Ren reveals to her that she is the evil Lord Palpatine's granddaughter. Notably, Kylo Ren tells Rey, "you don't just have power, you have [Palpatine's] power", highlighting that Rey inherited her greatest asset and strength from him. Indeed, J.J. Abrams and Rian John, like George Lucas before them, place great significance in the characters' lineages (Tate 2018).

Interestingly, in the opening scene of the final trilogy, *The Force Awakens* (2015), Jedi elder Lor San Tekka says to Kylo Ren: "you cannot deny the truth that is your family." That is precisely Rey's story, however, as she ultimately denies her grandfather and chooses her own path. It might be argued that Lor San Tekka's use of "family" should not be conflated with direct blood relatives, as Rey's affinity to the Skywalkers—and, by extension, both Rey and Luke's bonds with the resistance forces—suggests that they are adopted by alternative families or, conversely, adopt their own definitions of what constitutes "family". However, this would seem contradictory, as Kylo Ren is also making choices about his familial affinities as Lor San Tekka spoke these words to him, suggesting the latter specifically meant blood relatives. Following Heidegger's reading of Plato, then, we can instead read Lor San Tekka's "truth" as with the world of shadows that precedes the authoritative movement toward the ultimate Truth of the denouements: Luke and Rey are ultimately redeemed as hero/ines who assume no fault for their ancestors' vast crimes and arise victorious in large parts thanks to the powers they inherited.

In their quest for self-understanding through the Dark Side and Mirror Caves, Luke and Rey are faced with a self-reflection, implying that they contain the capacity for self-determination within their very (individual) selfhoods. Key to their narrative arcs is their rejection of the dark forces. This did not require critical interrogation of the historical legacies Luke and Rey assume, rather their hero identities are tied to a bounded notion of self, as symbolized by the self-contained mirror images they face in the caves. Furthermore, upon discovering their ancestral lineages, both Luke and Rey immediately escape and, therefore, enact an initial denial and disconnection from their family histories. This is perhaps most pronounced in Rey's ultimate decision to adopt the Skywalker surname. Of course, this is not to imply that the characters should have followed in their forefathers' legacies, but rather I wish to problematize a progressiveness underlying the narratives. While it could be argued that neither Rey nor Luke knew their lineages and should not be held accountable, this line of argument would, in fact, reinforce Wekker's formulation of the White innocence paradigm as it speaks to an epistemology of ignorance, a narrative of not-knowing that is central to the operations of a racist world that cannot seem to understand racism. Ignorance, in other words, is profoundly functional and, therefore, cannot (or, at least, cannot alone) absolve them. Rather, the point here is to interrogate the underlying "ideology of individualized virtue" (McDowell 2019, p. 26) that frames Rey through the "moral self-containedness of the transcendental subject" (p. 25). In his gender analysis of Rey's character as a flattened transgendering of Luke that remains faithful to masculinity, McDowell (2019) identifies in Rey an unproblematized "politics of abjection" and "politics of purity" (p. 27) that detaches appropriate political responsibility from her subjectivity so as to ease her as moral identification with the "good" within the rigid binary of good and evil.

In order to understand the role of mirrors (or mirror-images, to be more precise) as the metaphoric device that effectively encapsulates an epistemological framework that allows Luke and Rey to be redeemed of any ancestral crimes, we will take a shift into Lacan's psychoanalytical theory and, in particular, the notion of the mirror stage. More specifically, we turn to Seshadri-Crooks's (2002) germinal work which revisits the Lacanian model with a focus on race. Lacan (2006) developed a triad of psychoanalytic orders to explain (intra)psychic phenomena, comprising of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real realms. Put briefly, the formation of subjectivity takes place within this trio and, importantly, in relation to systems of language, signifiers, and dialogue with the social world. According to Lacan (2006), an infant first holds a primordial sense of the body in fragments, until the infant experiences the mirror stage wherein they perceive themselves in the mirror as no longer fragmented but as a self that is now coherent. The ego becomes constituted by this external sense of wholeness provided by the mirror. As such, the Imaginary is the internalized idealization of the self as whole and coherent, which is important to the structure of the racial imaginary; the Symbolic constitutes the exterior system of signifiers and language that reinforce the ego-idealization; and the Real is that which remains pre-mirror and cannot be symbolized.

Seshadri-Crooks (2002) offers a reformulation of this model in relation to race. Seshadri-Crooks (2002) assigns the visual to the Symbolic order, figuring Whiteness as the "master signifier" and other racial signifiers as constituting a "signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (p. 3). While Seshadri-Crooks speaks of the optic regime of race, or race as a "regime of visibility" (pp. 21–36), her argument goes well beyond the mere and conventional argument that race is a visual-social construct. Rather, her analysis puts forth Whiteness as the dominant fiction-of-wholeness, a conceptual alleged-totality that permeates the world into which subjects enter. In other words, anxieties experienced by racialized people are not as a result of ideologies of race, but rather are symptomatic of an alienation that is functional to a conception of Whiteness positioned as the master signifier. Racialized bodies are excluded both from the Symbolic realm of racial signifiers—always arbitrary yet construed as visually obvious—and from the Imaginary realm of Whiteness-as-wholeness. Whiteness, then, infiltrates the unconscious, promising wholeness and self-completion, yet ever-withholding them because unity with the gaze is impossible for racialized bodies within the symbolic order of race. Put more succinctly, Whiteness is a fiction-of-wholeness that privileges a sense of coherence determinably defined through symbolic signifiers of Whiteness. To this, we might add Badiou's (2010) insight that history, too, falls within the Lacanian order of the Symbolic, as fictional narrative that can only ever be "constructed after the fact" (p. 238). In other words, Whiteness as master signifier precludes history (in Derrida and Prenowitz (1995) sense vis-à-vis the archive); therefore, memory in a racialized society serves symbolically to buttress Whiteness and keep intact the fiction of Whiteness-as-wholeness. The mirror stage projects the individual from a place of fragmentation into fantasies of wholeness that, as Seshadri-Crooks (2002) reveals, are deeply aligned to Whiteness within the racialized world that already obsesses over the gaze and the visual.

Coming back to the mirror effects of both the Dark Side and Mirror caves, then, we find that the coherent self-images of two White protagonists further serves to reproduce Lacanian structure of Imagined wholeness of Whiteness. The caves and protagonist arcs point us to an epistemology of bounded individualism that houses a narrative of the past as foreclosable (via the protagonists' *decision* to forge ancestral *dis*-connections), so that the individual can wholly dictate the trajectory of their intergenerational narratives. The mirror reflections forefront a self that is perceptibly whole, bound, and, thus, sufficient in its capacity to offer imagined closure. Just as the child in Lacan (2006) mirror stage, the corporeal image Luke and Rey witness reflecting back at them "spatializes [each of them] as a container that contains [his/her] inner world" (Winnubst 2004). This is not a mirror stage or grand narrative of (fantasized) wholeness that is accessible, in contrast, to Finn, one of the few but major Black characters, who also shares some similar elements in his backstory with Rey.

Finn is likewise orphaned and "in search of a secure home [though, in his case], away from the fascist organization which he previously served" (Tate 2018, p. 18), in which he was only given the name, FN-2187. As Shedd (2016) argues, Finn was deprived of the self-determination we find in Rey's

assuming of the Skywalker surname: "the fact that Poe gives Finn his new name instead of encouraging him to come up with one on his own, and that Finn so easily and joyfully accepts it, seems to rob Finn of an important part of his self-determination" (p. 80). We might take this further and emphasize that the name Finn itself is a derivative of his stormtrooper number, thereby immortalizing the marker of his previous enslavement, for it was not Finn himself who reclaimed and refashioned the name, but rather he was a passive recipient of the re-naming process. At this moment, Finn is deemed in need of fixing and is sutured from elsewhere, which speaks to a configuration of Blackness "as something-to-be-cured" (Isoke 2018, p. 159). It brings to mind the Fieldses' (2012) apt analysis of Obama's framing as an avatar of racecraft through which his designation as a "black president" allegedly marked the arrival of "post-racialism," just as Finn's character was marketed in such a concerted way as to suggest a post-racial galactic universe in *Star Wars* lore, or in the actor, John Boyega's own words: "what I would say to Disney is do not bring out a Black character, market them to be much more important in the franchise that they are and then have them pushed to the side" (quoted in Stidhum 2020). Indeed, the very theft of agency in self-naming described above reverberates with Boyega's recent remarks to Disney: "You knew what to do with [Daisy Ridley and Adam Driver] but when it came to Kelly Marie Tran, when it came to John Boyega, you know fuck all" (quoted in Stidhum 2020).

It is important that the mirrors are offered to select White characters, for as Moten (2003) shows us, the "black mirror stage … operate[s] on different registers" (p. 176). Moten (2003) reveals that, whilst unable to meet the demands of the optic realm of Whiteness, the "black mirror stage" rather destabilizes the very need or desire for suture and wholeness, divesting from the "phantasmatic singularity" (p. 184) to rather localize the self in "the sound of the gaze" (p. 171), an epistemology that is improvisational in jazz-like manners. Thus, while the cave scenes' (re)staging of mirror stages is fitting or sufficient for its White protagonists, radical Black traditions neither require nor desire this kind of offering of a fiction-of-wholeness that is foreclosed (via the cave) and informed by Western Cartesian thought in presuming "full, self-present, and coherent subjects working against something or someone" (Weheliye 2014, pp. 2–6). Building on Hortense Spillers' notion of interior intersubjectivity, Isoke (2018) proposes epistemes that break away from such paradigms that would configure Blackness "as something-to-be-cured" (p. 159) to involve a leaning into one's own brokenness, a reclamation of the pre-mirror fragmentation that, in turn, productively opens the opportunity to "sing with the ancestors, write with spirits, and dance with ghosts in this world and foreign to it" (p. 159). It is this praxis of dwelling productively in the excess spaces where Blackness transcends normative notions of self as contained and coherent that we now turn to, highlighting Afrofuturist strategies that destabilize the boundaries of self (as individual) and of time (as linear and enclosed).

2.2. The Unbounded Cave: Embodiment and Collectivity in Black Panther

In keeping with the trope of cave, this section comparatively explores the "heart-shaped herb cave" in *Black Panther* (2018). The heart-shaped herb is a plant indigenous only to the fictional and futuristic world of Wakanda, whose wealth and technological advances are concealed from the rest of the world, along with its precious resources and kingdom. The herb is grown for the consumption of each heir as a way of invoking the power of the Black Panther and as an entry point into the "ancestral plane." We see this herb at three points in the movie. Firstly, when T'Challa assumes the throne. Secondly, when Erik Killmonger defeats T'Challa in ritual battle and is proclaimed the new king of Wakanda. Lastly, when T'Challa is revived from near-death through the help of Shuri. The scenes that take place in the Heart-Shaped Herb Cave differ starkly from the Dark Side and Mirror Cave in two fundamental respects: firstly, the journey requires a body-centered inward journey that contrasts with the external role of mirrors outlined earlier and, secondly, characters are not entering alone but are joined by a collective that is central to the ritual process. Both Killmonger and T'Challa are first tasked with imbibing a potion made from the "heart-shaped herb," which itself makes a symbolic connection between the natural world of herbs and the human body and/or the realm of emotions that are figuratively associated with hearts. Once the heart-shaped herb potion is

consumed, their whole bodies are then buried in a red sand, furthering this connection between the body and the natural world in a way that would imply that, while the body is a vehicle for knowledge and memory, it cannot be done in solitude, requiring the aid of a whole external ecosystem and community. As an initial ritual step, this process already destabilizes the Platonic world of knowledge.

Whereas Plato locates Truth outside the cave, drinking this potion initiates an inverse movement that locates meaning and truth within a realm—in this case, the ancestral plane—accessed primarily through the body. This radical break from Western epistemology can be understood through Diana Taylor's (2003) formulation of the body as an archival site, as beholding a repertoire of knowledge and system of knowing that transmits embodied memories that are both kept *and* transformed through the body's fluid "choreographies of meaning" (p. 32). For Taylor (2003) performative actions of the body serve to then animate an extensive resource of historical traditions, figures, and influences that are remembered through the body. However, unlike the Western confines of the archive that Derrida identifies, Taylor's (2003) body as archive is necessarily social/communal. According to Taylor (2003), the body is a fluid kind of archive through which "communal memories, histories, and values" (p. 21) are intergenerationally transmitted within and through the social scenes where oral and bodily practices are enacted. There is also a critique of Western ontology at play. Taylor (2003) etymologizes Western understandings of art and *imagen* within Eurocentric and Christian distinctions between God as creator and man as imitator, contrasting this with indigenous understandings that integrate the spiritual with the physical (p. 131).

Through this ritual process, each character is transported to versions of the ancestral plane. Killmonger and T'Challa both come into direct contact and conversation with their deceased fathers. The conversational format places the past and the present in dialogue, transcending the borders of life and death and of a linear temporality that separates the before and the now moments each generation embodies. This is first marked when the word, "Camagu," is spoken before T'Challa first enters the plane. A Xhosa word, "camagu," is a spiritual invocation that can be used to proclaim gratitude and give praise to the ancestors, "acknowledging that we live in a dual world of both the living and the ancestors" (Plaatjie 2020, p. 4). Discursively, the word invokes an ontology that does not rely on bounded notions of presence, as those "that came before us and now have left the physical world" (Plaatjie 2020, p. 4) continue to have a role in the material world the living inhabit. Coming back to Taylor (2003), this worldview that encompasses the living and the ancestral undermines the Western duality of the spiritual and physical. As we then see in T'Challa's case, through the ancestral plane, he is able to access not only his own memory and lineage via his father, but the broader "collective memory of his Panther ancestors" (Krishnamurti 2018, pp. 2–3). The social scope at play in the Heart-Shaped Herb Cave, then, is one that encompasses the individual and his direct ancestors as well as, by extension, the collective community and theirs.

Notably, the intergenerational conversations had on the ancestral plane do not offer closure. They can be distinguished by the unresolved and open-ended dilemmas each provokes. For T'Challa, a second visit to the ancestral plane includes a quarrel with his father about the decision to leave Killmonger abandoned in California (Saunders 2019). It is important that this takes place on T'Challa's second visit, as a backtracking that "re-present[s] the sequence of events…from contested points of views" (Hartman 2008b, p. 11). At the ancestral plane, Killmonger's last words to his father, N'Jobu, who suggests that they are both abandoned in the world outside Wakanda, are: "Or maybe your home is the ones that's lost; that's why they can't find us." N'Jobu closes his eyes and looks down, seemingly unable to retort or offer any further guidance to his son. The "maybe" emphasizes an open-endedness that marks the relationship between past and present as one that does not offer closure. These ancestral connections remain imbued with ambiguities and unresolved complexities, offering a conception of past and present as one that cannot be neatly packaged and invoking Hartman's (2008b) method of critical fabulation. For Hartman (2008b), the dead cannot be invoked for instructive ends that "provide closure" (p. 12), but rather require imaginative dialogue in which the "black noise" of opacity that "embody aspirations that are…derelict to capitalism" (p. 12). Thus, the limits of resolution in T'Challa and T'Chaka's engagements and the ambiguities in Killmonger

and N'Jobu's signal a critical fabulation that displaces authoritative accounts and suspends these ambiguities within the very failures that, in turn, embrace the "impossibility" (Hartman 2008b, p. 14) that animates a moral pendulum through which viewers simultaneously empathize as much with T'Challa as with Killmonger's politics.

As Saunders (2019) also points out, the dynamics between T'Challa and Killmonger are deeply intergenerational themselves: starting with political differences between N'Jobu and T'Challa's father, T'Chaka, that led to the former's death, the conflict "pit[s] a metaphorical MLK against an allegorical Malcolm X, but adds a multigeneration aspect with T'Challa and Killmonger taking up their fathers' causes" (p. 143). This further suggests a past that is continuous, undead, and intricate to understanding current affairs. Of importance, moreover, are both T'Challa and Killmonger's entry points into the ancestral plane. They both begin at the moments of trauma in which they witnessed their fathers murdered. These mark the points where N'Jobu and T'Chaka transition into the ancestral world, but for their sons it also marks the point of violent rupture that disconnects two generations. This invokes Isoke's (2018) insights into the productive work of "lean[ing] into [one's] own brokenness" (p. 158) in order to (as is, of course, true here) "sing with the ancestors" (p. 159). It is, more precisely at the moments when the two are being subsumed in sand that the traumatic flashbacks start coming, once again drawing a connection between the role of the body and the memory-work that follows.

Interestingly, Killmonger's journey to the ancestral plane involves distinct memories located in Oakland and moves into his former apartment home, where his father, N'Jobu, was killed. Saunders (2019) distinguishes between Killmonger's ancestral plane and the "sublime Serengeti Plain awash in purple twilight" that T'Challa visits as foreshadowing the climax where the former cannot lay 'rightful' claim to the throne of Wakanda. At the very least, it suggests a notion of ancestral connection as bound to historical circumstance and experience. However, it is also simultaneously unbound. Upon facing his imminent death after the mortal fight with T'Challa, Killmonger locates ancestry well beyond—or in between—the lands of Oakland and Wakanda: "Bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage". As a descendent of Wakanda, Killmonger's direct ancestors likely were not on the slave ships invoked here, as Wakanda reputably circumvented Western colonial and imperial contact. Yet, that does not diminish his claim of kinship with the African diaspora. Rather, it suggests a reconception of one's 'roots' that is more akin to Glissant's (1997) notion of rhizomes: an alternative to root-identity, rhizomatic identity envisions a root system that does not grow downwards (i.e., singular and totalitarian narratives), but rather horizontally (i.e., a decentered identity rooted in connectivity, movement, and sociality).

Killmonger's journey on the ancestral plane radically departs from the individualistic epistemology underpinning those of Luke and Rey at multiple layers: the ritual itself is a collective endeavor; the Black Panthers commune with their ancestors through dialogue; and the geopolitical breadth of the ancestral plane signaled by Killmonger's experience proposes a rhizomatic social narrative of one's heritage. As Moten (2017) puts it, "Blackness is the production, collection, and anarrangement of new singularities (which is to say new ensembles)" (p. 117), in which archiving is simultaneous to gathering and, vice versa, "diaspora is an archive" (p. 117). It also speaks to Wright's (2015) notion of epiphenomenal time, which ushers in a way of viewing Blackness horizontally, with diverse communities from across the diaspora as composing a sort of multiverse that traverses different time-spaces at once. Whereas the *Star Wars* scenes analyzed above place individuality t the forefront, *Black Panther* (2018) brings up collectivity at various levels, one that spans both horizontally and vertically, unbinding temporalities through intergenerational conversations that cross the borders of life and death and through the invocation of diaspora as an archival site of memory that, in turn, becomes embodied by the likes of Killmonger. In order to delve deeper into Wright's epiphenomenal time, we will now turn to another popular piece of Afrofuturism produced in recent years: *Watchmen* (2019).

2.3. Toward Radical Reimaginings of Temporality in HBO's Watchmen

Three characters in HBO's *Watchmen* series (2019) hold particular relevance to this paper: Looking Glass, a White protagonist who, in a manner much more pronounced yet more nuanced than Luke and Rey, holds a deep connection with mirrors; Angela "Sister Night" Abar, whose experiences, we will see, encapsulate the kind of embodiments touched upon in *Black Panther* above; and Dr. Manhattan, arguably the epitome of Wright's epiphenomenal time. It will be argued that this series offers some insightful strategies for reimagining approaches to the abovementioned themes of mirrors, embodiment, and temporality.

Wade "Looking Glass" Tillman is a detective who wears a reflective mask designed to be a sort of mirror. During his teenage years as a Jehovah's Witness, he was once on a missionary trip, preaching at a New Jersey carnival. Led into a Hall of Mirrors by a young woman pretending to be attracted to Wade, he allows the young woman to remove his clothes only to realize he was being pranked as she ran off and left him naked. Lamenting his falling to temptation, a giant alien squid suddenly teleports into New York City, emitting a psychic blast that kills everyone at the carnival, with the exception of Wade who survived under the protection of the mirrors. As a detective in the fictional world where officers are now encouraged to wear masks, Wade wears one that is reflective and mirror-like, partly to help cope with the anxiety of squid attacks and partly as a fragment of his superhero identity. As Looking Glass, he is allegedly able to know when someone is telling the truth or not, interrogating suspected white supremacists in 'the Pod' where a plethora of images flash around Looking Glass and the suspect—from grain fields to the moon landing to Confederate and Nazi flags to images of Harriet Tubman and the Ku Klux Klan—while he repeatedly asks: "Are you a member of or do you associate with members of the white supremacist organization known as the Seventh Cavalry."

Beyond the obvious connection, the psychoanalytic concept of the mirror stage is appropriate for understanding Looking Glass for two reasons: as mentioned above, his trauma was caused by a psychic blast, and because his character is aesthetically analogous to that of Rorschach from the original *Watchmen* graphic novel, whose mask is based on the psychological Rorschach tests (George 2019). Indeed, the pod scenes possess parallel elements to the cave-mirror scenes of *Star Wars*, as contained spaces in which the truth is sought through the central role of mirrors. Based on our reading of the Mirror Stage above, it is fitting that this interrogation process is used specifically to expose White supremacists. The implicit idea is that White supremacists can deny their affiliation but, by staring both at the subliminal images spanning the Pod's walls and the mirror reflections fabricated by Looking Glass' mask, the hidden truths will be picked up by Looking Glass. While we are not provided a detailed explanation of how (or whether) Looking Glass' process effectively works, we can employ the Lacanian insights outlined earlier to offer some interpretations. Seshadri-Crooks (2003) insights show that Whiteness is offered as the Imaginary's fiction-of-wholeness offered by the extended mirror stage that is the optical regime of race broadly speaking. The suspects should, in this sense, feel something in facing a mirror image of themselves in the Pod. However, they are also flooded with contradictory images from American history that, together, form an incoherent and fractured whole. In this regard, the suspects can be thought of as coherent mirror selves only alongside the pre-mirror fragmentation that destabilizes a narrative of America as progressive and intact. It is in this ambiguous space that Looking Glass is able to gain insight into the Real realm of suspects' unspeakable truths. Thus, while Looking Glass appears to stay faithful to the mirrors that we have shown to be tied to epistemologies of Whiteness in the films discussed above, *Watchmen* (2019) employs the strategy to rather unveil the racist truths the underlie the optics of Whiteness. Nevertheless, Looking Glass is only able to tell if someone is telling the truth or not (i.e., an interrogation of the fraught Symbolic realm of Whiteness). He does not possess the capacity to remember the past beyond his own individual traumatic experience. This realm of memory-work is located in the character, Sister Night.

Angela "Sister Night" Abar's arc is replete with complex relations to the past (e.g., via her grandfather, her mentor, and her husband). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the episodes where Angela drinks a bottle of nostalgia pills that are said to contain her grandfather's memories. Nostalgia pills synthetically harvested memories derived from people's brains and put

into tablet form that would allow patients to re-experience those memories. Angela is then transported to her grandfather, Will Reeves', body. She directly experiences the painful array of events he experienced in the 1930s. She discovers the truth about her grandfather's identity, as the true Hooded Justice, the first American superhero who, in typical American whitewashing fashion, was rewritten within popular memory to be a White man. Angela relives his life viscerally through a series of scenes that constantly alternate between these memories from the past and her occasional coming back to the current. While the amount of pills she ingested could have likely caused an overdose for anyone else, as evidenced when she is told she is about to turn into a vegetable, Angela survives the experience and is able to embody the weight of this history, quite possibly due to her blood relation to Will. In ways reminiscent of, though different to, *Black Panther*'s use of the heart-shaped herb, *Watchmen* (2019) produces an experience of memory that is body-centered. As in the former cases where the ancestral plane was accessed firstly through traumatic experiences, Angela likewise enters a sustained experience of her family's traumatic history, its silences, ruptures, and displacements.

Hartman's (2008b) notion of critical fabulation is, once again, important here. Like the Black Venus of Hartman's (2008b) study, Will "Hooded Justice" Reeves is robbed of voice in the annals of cultural memory. Instead of filling in the gaps herself, Angela is transported into the "infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands" (Hartman 2008b, p. 6) that constitute Will's experiences of racialized oppression and erasure, forced to dwell in this space and witness its productive conversion into the "black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity"—that makes up Will's reactions as a hidden figure of vigilantism. Just as Moten (2003) traces a "radically exterior aurality" (p. 191) within Aunt Hester's scream during a violent encounter with her slave-master in Frederick Douglass' narrative, Will's sonic production can be seen as the force that gives birth not only to the entirety of the superhero tradition in *Watchmen* (2019) America but also to Angela. Aunt Hester's scream disrupts the limits of the visual and ushers in a "sonic epistemology" that situates both the moment Blackness witnesses its own vulnerability and the "foundation of [its] resistance" (Stoever-Ackerman 2011, p. 21). Here, Angela's mirror stage is profoundly the sonic terrain of Moten's black mirror stage.

Angela begins to directly embody Will's experiences as a result of consuming the Nostalgia pills, beginning with a drumline and followed by her sudden (dis)placement into a black-and-white scene that introduces her younger grandfather as an aspiring cadet being inducted into the police force. Ignored by White officers, he is formally badged by the only Black officer who whispers the warning, "beware the cyclops", alluding to the White supremacist organization. The cyclops metaphor is further symbolic of the gaze that defines the regime of race, as discussed earlier. The scenes visually alternate between Angela and her grandfather playing the same role, as she interweavingly walks his walk and talks his words, while flashbacks of the historic (yet widely forgotten) Tulsa Massacre abound, an event which heavily cost the lives and financial security of Black Tulsa in 1921 and which also started the whole *Watchmen* (2019) series (Chang 2019). Elements of the traumatic memory from the Massacre plays in the background unpredictably and subtly; displaced from history and silenced, the reoccurring flashbacks interweaved with(in) the memories signal the inability to truly erase the past within a restaurant. In Hartman (2008b) sense, these scenes can best be described as a re-sequencing, rearrangement of chronology that refigures a (hi)story that was denied voice and undoes time's presumed linearity. Multiple temporalities are constantly weaved together as, for example, will is being lynched by White policemen for poking his nose "in White folks' business" and, as the latter cut Will down and leave, we see it is Angela who is gasping for air and tied up by the noose.

Soon after, we witness the scene where Will Reeves is looking into two mirrors—a large and hand mirror—to apply makeup in his transformation into Hooded Justice and, from our angle, we see Angela's face reflected in the hand mirror. This alludes to the mirror stage, yet the experience is in excess of optics and quickly moves into a sonic terrain that weaves some verbal narration with a non-verbal scene that is deprived of dialogue and rife only with the grunts, violence, and screams emitted from Hooded Justice's fight with the Ku Klux Klan. We hear Hooded Justice's heavy breathing against the backdrop of the 1930s jazz song "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" by the

Ink Spots. After beating an entire group of Klansmen, the first bit of dialogue we hear from this scene is by a White storeowner who asks Hooded Justice, "What the fuck are you supposed to be?" The question underscores the limits of the Symbolic realm of language and gaze that excludes Blackness from understandability—not even a "who" but a "what"—while the heavy breathing from Hooded Justice continues to echo loudly as he resists answering the question, or rather responds by breaking the store's glass window in an escape that metaphorically reaffirms Black epistemology whereby aural signifiers transcend the visual ones that seek to categorize and capture through the all-knowing gaze (Stoever-Ackerman 2011). In the finale episode, when her grandfather asks Angela if she felt what he felt during the Nostalgia experience, she mistakes anger for the actual emotions of "fear" and "hurt", to which Will then says, "you can't heal under a mask … wounds need air." This message of unmasking is less a critique of the opacity that masks symbolize; rather, it is an indication of the healing that is still needed for the intergenerational trauma that is simultaneous to the history of masked heroism in the *Watchmen* (2019) world. At the culmination of this conversation, will also discloses to Angela that Dr. Manhattan's strategic actions throughout the events, how he knew what would transpire. Specifically, he relays a message from Dr. Manhattan for Angela: "You can't make an omelet without breaking a couple of eggs." To understanding the temporal significance of this statement, we now turn to a closer look at Dr. Manhattan.

A discussion of Dr. Manhattan—a nuclear physicist who is transformed into a god-like being through an incident at a nuclear test chamber, imbued with the power to control subatomic particles and bend the quantum universe to his will—is perhaps most appropriately anchored by the contributions of Michelle Wright (2015), precisely because she suggests theoretical physics as an insightful way of informing and approaching Black epistemology. Writing specifically against dominant narratives that narrate Blackness through a progressive linearity (West African—middle passage—North America/Caribbean), Wright (2015) calls upon physicists like Newton and Einstein to reconceptualize Blackness as nonlinear and nondirect. Her primary concern is creating a horizontal view of Blackness that can view diverse communities from across the diaspora as composing a sort of multiverse of different time-spaces. Blackness, here, experiences temporality through epiphenomenal time, as an embodied capacity to travel this multiverse and constantly foster new formulations and meanings of identity. Of interest here is Wright's (2015) emphasis on Black time being non-linear. Thus, when Dr. Manhattan proclaims, "I do not experience the concept of before," he likewise invokes a non-linear temporality that radically eliminates clear distinctions between the past and the present. Indicative of the kind of Black sociality and embodiment practices that we see in the *Black Panther* scenes studied above, it is worth noting that in the *Watchmen* series' iteration of Dr. Manhattan, his memory had been strategically erased so he and Angela can live together without his identity being revealed. In order for Dr. Manhattan to return, Angela bashes in his skull and removes an object, allowing his memory and powers to return as he begins to glow with his iconic blue skin.

Near the end of the series and right before his fight against the Seventh Cavalry, Dr. Manhattan tells Angela that that was the moment he fell in love, even though he had told her this earlier when they met: "I've always been in love with you. My perception of time …" That is, much earlier in a bar in Vietnam, Dr. Manhattan told Sister Night that he had fallen in love with her already, but in the future (i.e., the moment before said fight). Dr. Manhattan here presents a radical love that traverses time in multiple directions. This becomes more pronounced with the final scene of the whole series where Angela is about to walk on water. At the bar in Vietnam, Angela asks if she ate an egg somehow infused with his powers, whether she too would have the ability to walk on water like him. Theoretically, yes, Dr. Manhattan confirms. Later on, before the Seventh Cavalry fight, Dr. Manhattan seems to be trivially distracted, cooking breakfast even though he knew the Cavalry was outside Angela's kitchen preparing to strike. His waffles were more symbolic, though, as he was subtly alluding to the eggs, foreshadowing both his immanent death and the finale where Angela finds only one egg left in her kitchen, after which we see her proceed to walk toward the pool before the scene cuts. Here, we are yet again confronted with a sense of embodiment that is suggested through consumption (as in the heart-shaped herb potion and the nostalgia pills), an occurrence that can be

loosely tied to food and culinary practice as an important site of memory in diasporic cultures. More concretely, this implicit ending suggests a transference of power between Dr. Manhattan and Angela: Dr. Manhattan not only proclaims a love that is not bound by any linear or traditional notions of temporality, but he further extends his love by staying with Angela beyond his death (Angela literally embodies his memory).

3. Conclusions

Through a comparative analysis of two *Star Wars* trilogies and two afro-futurist film and television series, this paper highlights paradigmatic differences in how history and its legacies are either downplayed or critically engaged with. In the former, the main protagonists are afforded a remarkable sense of innocence that allows them to prevail are heroes despite their evil Sith lord ancestry and the fact that their inherent Jedi powers are essentially inherited through these lineages. As such, this paper argues that they serve as allegories for "White Innocence" (Wekker 2016) which reinforce ahistorical narratives of justice that are anchored by a strategic forgetting of the past. On the other hand, a bourgeoning afro-futurist tradition in popular cinema, exemplified here by *Black Panther* (2018) and the *Watchmen* television series (2019), unsettles the logics of this ahistoric epistemology, circumventing linear temporalities to reconsider how the past, present and future are rather "coiled around each other" (Isoke 2018, p. 149).

More specifically, this paper closely scrutinizes the tropes of caves and mirrors throughout the works analyzed to identify key some fundamental differences. In the *Star Wars* trilogies, Luke and Rey each experience their respective cave scene in a deeply individualistic way that orients their gaze to *see* their past and future as determinable through individual choice and will. This is contrasted with the *Black Panther* (2018) cave scene that is marked by both collectivity and embodiment (as opposed to being optically fixated on the gaze) with both T'Challa and Killmonger journeying to ancestral realms by way of body-centered rituals that require the help of others. In facing their pasts, Luke and Rey are, furthermore, confront mirror images which, when framed through Seshadri-Crooks' Lacanian analysis of race, becomes sufficiently totalizing because Whiteness figures as both master signifier and coherent fiction-of-wholeness within the Symbolic order of a racialized world. Luke and Rey, in other words, experience the Lacanian mirror stage here and, as White protagonists, are able to gaze a coherence and totality in their images. In *Watchmen* (2019), we witness a different mirror experience that is closer to what Moten (2003) calls the "black mirror stage" which divests from the very desire for wholeness to dwell rather in the "sound of the gaze" (ibid, p. 171). Here, a scene where Will Reeves looks into two mirrors becomes a deeply sonic terrain that lacks dialogue and forefronts non-verbal sounds such as heavy breathing, physical fighting, grunts and, finally, breaking glass.

Several points remain to be further investigated and they fall outside the scope of this paper. With a focus on the cave scenes experienced by the main protagonists, we exclude other characters who merit sustained and closer analyses. Kylo Ren, in particular, presents a complex character who is also profoundly grappling with his ancestry, pendulating between the dynasty legacy of his heroic parents, General Leia and Han Solo, and the unfinished work of his grandfather, Darth Vader. Kylo Ren goes so far as to tell Rey to "let the past die. Kill it, if you have to." More broadly, it is also important to highlight that all these speculative works dealt exclusively with male lineages. The Ancestral Plane in *Black Panther* noticeably consists of only men. Even the women protagonists, Rey and Angela, can only approach their lineages through their respective grandfathers. In the above analysis of *Watchmen* (2019) Hooded Justice points to Angela's embodiment of his memories, but does not look at the queer politics he also embodies; indeed, further investigation is necessary to unpack the simultaneous erasure of Black queer history invoked here, anchored perhaps in a broader contextualization of the sexual politics that undergird racial histories generally.

There are countless other works of speculative culture that merit close investigations of their treatments of history, temporality, memory, and ancestry. *Lovecraft Country* (2020), for example, experiments in a myriad of ways such as time travel and magic to approach themes of ancestry, race, and the historical legacies of slavery, racial violence, and White privilege generally. It will also be

important to keep track of the ongoing ways that Whiteness, race, and memory are configured in ongoing or novel films. For example, as several sequels to *Avatar* (2009) make their way, it will be prudent that we closely monitor this futuristic narrative with obvious racial undertones that positions a human (read: White) to be privileged enough to simply deny his people's colonial legacy and simultaneously choose to become one of the (and, thereby, save the entirety of the) indigenous Na'vi tribe. Netflix' upcoming live-action adaption of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* should also prove interesting, particularly as the source material grapples with the notion of ancestry is sustained and nuanced ways but the departure of creators Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko from the adaption due to creative differences should raise concerns, especially after the whitewashed attempt by M. Night Shyamalan (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* 2010).

Yet, we are left with the question of what to then make of these analyses. In a brilliant piece about another important speculative work featuring mirrors, imagined futures, and colonizers, poet and essayist Franny Choi (2020) pushes us to question the ease with which we assume the popular nomenclature to describe the current moment as "unprecedented times," writing instead, "an unprecedented time that's come a million times before" (n.p.) Choi makes us reconsider the spectacle of racism as sorts of "reboots"—not unlike those from the ever-growing Hollywood trend of cinematic reboots—by reformulating the popular phrase, "now, more than ever," as "now, more than ever, again—and again—and again" (n.p.) While this work of naming history's repetitions is useful for "those whose privilege has soothed into ignorance" (n.p.), for those of us who know this already, there is little comfort. The comfort, Choi suggests, is rather in the "capacity for divergence," the possibilities created through infinite divergent imaginings that subvert the dominant tropes. Perhaps the afro-futurist works included in this article are not perfect and can only (or choose only to) diverge so far. These divergences, nevertheless, "point to in us" (Choi 2020, n.p.) such infinite possibilities, and it is up to us to continue speculating and imagining in ever-radical ways that diverge, reimagine, and, above all, strive for a love that is unbound and infinite, as Dr. Manhattan has shown us is possible.

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