

MFA THESIS

MY SOUL TO KEEP

DEPAUL VERA

FORWARD¹

I build my practice around my natural sense of curiosity for different methods of art making; learning and exploring these methods is a key element of my practice. When I'm dealing with a variety of concepts such as desire, lusts, sex and commitment to discrimination, isolation, education, and societal concerns—all these things quickly complicate my work. I don't mind the mess; it's reassuring to be surrounded by my own chaos as opposed to floating in space. Although there are numerous ways to articulate my attachment to these concepts, my process is a contemplative one where I take time to negotiate my perspective on certain issues. On the other hand, I find myself obsessing over some guy I met last week and having to work through lingering emotions. And all of this is part of my practice. I choose to embrace these random thoughts as constructive and useful tools. Sometimes, I find myself wondering how best to convey lusts. Is it by obsessively rendering or sketching something? Is effort and eroticism related? Or sometimes I wonder how long ago was interracial marriage legalized, or what does it mean for the oppressed to yearn their oppressor?

Despite my random thoughts, one of my constant concerns is how the division and unity across class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and beliefs affect interracial relations. I'm interested in exploring these intersections as an attempt not only to know how they affect desire, but also to question the historical baggage that tags along with that desire. To deconstruct such baggage, my art practice ranges from drawing and designing to archiving and collaging, each of which emphasizes specificities better than the other. The goal is not to have my concerns in competition with one another nor do I want to limit my practice to one way of making. I understand that issues of race and intersectionality are complicated; therefore it's beneficial using different methods of art making to decipher those complexities. My work establishes meaning through exploring these thoughts in a safe studio space while letting my audience fill in the blanks where they see fit.

¹ *Forward* by Beyoncé on *Lemonade* (2016) – Despite the past, life continues to move forward.

Introduction

"Just because you took longer than others, doesn't mean you failed."

-Daniel Friday Danzor

I was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1992 to a single mother, Romalisa Hendrix. Yes, we are related to Jimi. And no, we aren't associated with his success. Soon after my birth, we planted roots in Kentucky, where I grew up. As time passed, drawing was my escape from a traumatic childhood; understanding the world any other way seemed impossible to me. Even the smallest tasks left me with feelings of self-doubt and unanswered questions. How were my friends reading faster than me? Why wasn't my mom picking me up from school? Why did my mom work so much? I worried about these questions and many others, which led to feelings of desperation and resentment that I tried to eliminate through drawing.

I was most inspired by the colorful compositions and playful compositions from Pop Artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol because they were a relief from my inner turmoil. I would adopt their compositions and draw myself in them. By drawing myself in their patterned combinations, I was able to ascend into my own world and control my own life.

Despite this inner turmoil, I gained a reputation as "Everyone's Best Friend." It was quite easy for me to engage with a variety of people. However, my concerns were not of affiliation but adapting the structures, skills, and habits from those more fortunate than me. Of course, this is easier said than done for a Black, Gay man in the South where moral and political conservatism still holds too much power and forced me to contemplate my existence in uncomfortable ways.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a scholar, activist, and author, explains this adaptation of Black identity as a double-consciousness, stating, "...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 5). Stumbling into Du Bois' research pained and discombobulated me. I've never been able to articulate such an accurate identification of

my consciousness. I often find myself feeling disposable and feeling that every aspect of who I am and where I come from is unworthy of recognition. Du Bois further explains,

"The American Negro would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro souls in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois 5).

Although I am unaware of the opportunities I have lost because of my skin color, I am certain there are far greater chances of success for those of lighter complexions. Looking at unemployment rates from 2016, Blacks had the highest percentage at 8.4 out of 10, as opposed to Whites' 4.3 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017, par. 1). Although the specifics of these statistics aren't supported, systematic oppression and quiet discrimination play major factors here. Even though I understand racism against Blacks is apparent, this does not diminish my attraction toward White men. This contradiction is at the center of my work and at the center of my understanding of who I am and what I desire.

Relationships

"I've been shunned by Whites for being Black, I've been hated by Blacks for being Gay, and I've been disliked by Gays for being too feminine."

-RuPaul Charles

Collecting images came easy. I find them, save them, archive them, organize them from body type to body parts then come back to them later, sometimes years later. Knowing my archive is secure, even if I don't use it everyday, it feels right because I know my images are among their friends. Although I never expected to display them—they were too sexually charged for a conservative environment—I saved the images nonetheless.

I realize now that I was preparing myself for the ultimate curation—digital collage. Now, friends found their best friends, eternal lovers, temporary lovers, and lethal enemies and beyond. Through digital collage, for example, Black men in the images I discovered and archived a decade ago kiss passionately with a White man in an image I scanned yesterday. By paring couples that seem impossible, I felt destined to unite these images. In many ways, my practice is a process to disrupt this imbalance, and I find myself wondering why it continues to be impossible.

My work in the studio to unite couples whom might not otherwise existed together because of racial inequalities, collapses in comparison to the extreme work that literal interracial couples had to endure for their relationships to be recognized. Such as the love between Richard and Mildred Loving, the first interracial couple legally married in the United States in 1963. After eloping to Washington, D. C., they were arrested back home where Virginia law prohibited intermarriage. It wasn't until 1967 in *Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that marriage across racial lines was legal throughout the country (Bialik 2017, par. 1). Even with intermarriage becoming more common, the stigma around the subject continues. I recognize this stigma in mass media images—the source for my collages— to spill into large portions of materials today. From stock photography to fashion magazines, the majority of relationships we see in mass media are

divided by race and sexual preference. Furthermore, representing sex between gay interracial couples is close to nonexistent.

To counter this racist representation, I alter photos of gay couples and transform White bodies to Black and Brown bodies. These photos make up a series I call *Erased Whitewashing*. An individual piece, also titled *Erased Whitewashing* (Fig. 1) is made from a cropped still from a pornographic gay website that specializes in creating films with stereotypical White muscular bodies. In this work, I present the original image of two bodies having sex, alongside the manipulated image. The "before" image is a staged sexual position with one partner in front of the other. The scene is disrupted by the implied power dynamic of the "after" image, now that the dominant male's Whiteness has been transformed. This power dynamic speaks to my reversal of slavery times by now having a White body submit to a Black body. I use Photoshop to add different shades of brown, layer by layer, permanently transforming the flesh from a bright paleness to a luscious brown. This offers an immediate representation of Black bodies, which were largely underrepresented.

Despite Black porn being the most popular searched porn in the United States, it is still considered the most taboo socially (O'Hara, 2017). The reality is that I do not see Black bodies represented around me, not in porn, network television, advertisements, or many others; this is the otherness that drives everything that I do in my work. The few moments where Black bodies are present are not enough to compensate this overwhelming scarcity. It's evident that this world did not intend for me to exist, therefore, I am required to assert my existence in everything that I make. Unapologetically.

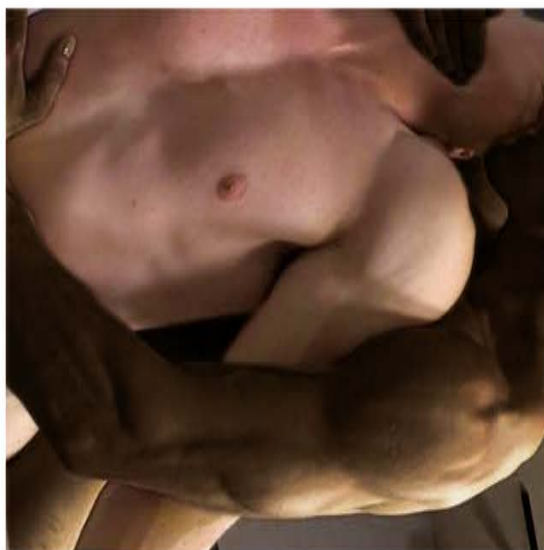


Figure 1: DePaul Vera, Erased Whitewashing. Digital Manipulation. Dimensions vary. 2016.

African American artist, Daniel B. Tisdale explores a process similar to mine. Tisdale manipulates portraits of African Americans into representations of idealized Whiteness. Born in Los Angeles, and now Harlem-based, he is also an educator, and activist. I'm most interested in his *Paul Robeson* (Fig. 2) piece, from his *Post Plantation Pop* series. This series questions our social conventions for identifying people by race and gender.

Tisdale manipulates the facial features of historic portraiture and juxtaposes the original with the manipulated portrait side-by-side to suggest a sort of metamorphosis of racial identities. By physically altering photographs using time-consuming methods in the dark room (versus my quick Photoshop filters), he slowly transforms the recognizable Robeson into a White man. His skin is smoothed out and lightened. His hair, previously uneven and free, is now shaped and sharpened into a widow's peak, just as sharp as his now full eyebrows and jawline. The elongated nasal bridge, which is now thin—ridden of broad nostrils, a physical trait common among West African slaves. His full lips are now thinned, which appear to display a subtle smirk. His eyes, at last, are the finishing Tisdale touch. Never mind that the image is in black and white, his eyes, once brown, now appear to be blue.

Together, mine and Tisdale's series imply a disturbing feeling of dissonance and disjunction between the structures of beauty and reality. Black features are often undermined and disregarded as beautiful until appropriated for others' success. Unfortunately, I had fallen into this manipulated mentality at a young age, believing my Blackness was poison and the only antidote was Whiteness. The burden of White-envy dominated my psyche just as Du Bois explicitly explained, therefore, in *Erased Whitewashing*, it felt appropriate to have the White figure be submissive to begin a dialogue about society's White, male-dominance and to question masculinity's fragility with submission. Heteronormativity mandates that a man who likes being penetrated is not a man. This is reiterated throughout culture and society; mass media, education curriculums, jurisprudence, and social conventions. Within a heterosexual construct, sex is used to dominate and control. It is also wildly accepted under the rules that sex is only for reproduction purposes. But even straight people have sex for fun, thus countering the heterosexual construct. This forces me to ask why gay sex is taboo besides lacking reproduction purposes?



Figure 2: Daniel B. Tisdale, *Paul Robeson (Post-Plantation Pop)*. Photograph Manipulation. Dimension Unknown. 1988.

<http://www.drawingcenter.org/en/drawingcenter/5/exhibitions/14/past/742/selections-44/>

I learned a lot from *Erased Whitewashing*; it was the process that started my journey of converting found images of white couples into images of interracial couples. This process made me aware and more cautious of the bodies I decided to portray. It also helped me raise questions about discrimination against Blacks within gay communities. My interest is in making images of Queer, Black bodies to break barriers of sexual fetishizations and exclusions.

In her essay, *Pages of Whiteness*, Tracey D. Morgan begins with, "To be gay is to be white" (Morgan 280). I was taken aback by this realization and immediately disheartened. My existence had been summed up in one sentence. Although I recognize that humans are very complex, myself included, the fact is largely inescapable that my sexuality defines my identity. I've been told so much that I'm more than my sexuality, however, people immediately label me as gay before my race. What I realized after reading Tracy's essay is that this label that has been adapted to me has a racial dimension that left me feeling confused and alienated. To be doubly othered in this way by the word "gay" was truly devastating. The experience of being devastated confirmed longstanding feelings of self-doubt that started in my adolescence. What resurrected a stronger sense of dignity was a kind of second coming-out, where I finally embraced my Blackness. Just as I went through complications and denial of accepting my sexuality as a gay man, I had to establish an appreciation for my Blackness. Accepting this part of my identity came with its own challenges and shortcomings. Like RuPaul said, already outcasted from society for being Black, then isolated from gay communities for being Black and too feminine, on top of being outcasted from Black communities for being gay was and will always be my reality.² A constant back and forth or push and pull component on my psyche articulated earlier as Double-Consciousness was now a Triple-Consciousness that made exile truly unbearable. How was I supposed to overcome such bearings not long after reclaiming my identity?

² Following the tragic killing of two black men by police officers and the terrible mass shooting of police officers at a peaceful protest in Dallas, Texas, one Twitter user took it upon themselves to call out Ru for not mentioning #BlackLivesMatter. RuPaul responded on Twitter with a tweet that is quoted at the beginning of this section on page five.

Redemption

"I didn't change, I became."

-Dawn Richard

I believe there comes a time for everyone, usually during adulthood, when you stop comparing yourself to others and start living your life for yourself. This epiphany happened after recognizing many prejudices against me. This also helped me see my own privilege in a strange way. After all, all of us, no matter our identifiers, enjoy some degree of privilege. I became consciously aware of the responsibility I owe myself and where to distribute my time and energy—to not waste them on circumstances that diminish my worth; I choose to heighten my awareness of my own privilege and leverage that privilege.

Devon Carbado, a writer on topics such as employment discrimination, criminal procedure, constitutional law, and identity, explains that to become aware of your identity privilege,

“...understanding the conceptualization of discrimination is crucial. He goes on to say that our identities are reflective and constitutive of systems of oppression. Racism requires white privilege. Sexism requires male privilege. Homophobia requires heterosexual privilege. The very intelligibility of our identities is their association, or lack thereof, with privilege. This creates an obligation on the part of those of us with privileged identities to expose and to challenge them” (Carbado 191).

With Carbado's words in mind, I made the decision that the next step in the progression of my collages was to challenge the dialectics of oppression. Several of the resulting collages revolve around segregation and discrimination against Blacks; these collages rely heavily on imagery from the 1950s and 60s that I then crop and merge into today's new stock photography images.

After stripping certain elements away from old images, such as backgrounds and placing exposed images in different contexts, it now has a new light, a new meaning. For example, in my collage, *Just Watching...* (Fig 3.) I combined two images, a stereotyped

representation of current gay culture and an awful murder from the early 1900s.³ The stories of both collages separately speak of extreme contrasts—one highlights an intimate embrace of a hypermasculine couple; while the other, according to historian, Alonzo Smith, is a vicious moment captured of White men posing around a mutilated and charred corpse in Omaha, Nebraska in 1919. The body belonged to William Brown (Calloway and Smith 69).

I discovered both of these images a few weeks after a trip to Los Angeles, where I visited West Hollywood's gay scene for the first time. There were a lot of firsts for me during this trip, sleeping in a penthouse, emerging myself in LA's art culture, being surrounded by other Black Queers and ultimately enjoying the life I've waited too long to enjoy. However, the adventure turned humiliating when I tried to pursue men who piqued my interest. Their hostility to my fragile gestures annihilated any lustful thoughts, and suddenly my sex drive was gone. This disenchantment and my frustration of being othered in an already othered community was the spark that initiated the combination of these two images.

Together, as a finished collage, this piece is an extreme exaggeration of discrimination and prejudices between Whites and Blacks. It stresses the lack of concern one race may have for the other—look at the way the couple embraces one another in the presence of horrific incidents, just the same as some White people today tend to care less about issues that don't affect them personally. This hatred or carelessness is on the rise in America. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Report (UCR) out of the 7,227 single-bias hate crime offenses reported in 2016, 58.5 percent stemmed from a race/ethnicity/ancestry bias. (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2016, par. 4). This discrimination has been constant throughout history; however, I believe it has amplified due to the rise of Trump's America.⁴ His appeal to the working-class White American has stoked racial tensions. Discrimination isn't so quiet anymore. Confronting this reality was the barrier that needed to happen in my previous work—to put my desires in perspective, however, being the stubborn romantic that I am, configuring those feelings into anything other than love and lust was out of the question.

³ *The Omaha Courthouse Lynching*, 1919

⁴ "What's Going on With America's White People?", *Politico Magazine*, 2016



Figure 3: DePaul Vera, *Just Watching...*, Digital Collage. Dimensions vary. 2017.

My collages are not jigsaw puzzles, but more so like Rubix cubes. All jumbled up, each tell their own story and may be similar to the next, but until arranged accordingly, they won't ever truly complete a narrative, and I don't plan to arrange them. Why should I? Am I supposed to? I don't believe so; for the work is not meant to chaperone an experience nor is it forcing a call to action as opposed to my other work, particularly my artist's books.

Evade AIDS (Fig. 4) is an initiative I started that I wish was available to me when I was younger. It is a starting point for information and resources for gay, Black men to prepare themselves for safe sex and to prevent HIV or treat it. Due to the lack of insight during Sex Education in my small hometown, I felt it was important to use art and design to bring awareness to STIs to combat boring abstinence-only information for teenagers.

I decided specifically to focus on HIV awareness and prevention. I created over two thousand artist's books and designed packaging for five hundred condoms after the Centers for Disease Control announced that one in twenty African-American males will be diagnosed with the virus that causes AIDS (Allen 2016, par. 2). After learning of this statistic, I immediately changed the concept of my artist book to bring greater awareness to AIDS and increasing HIV infection rates among Gay/Bi Black American men. Shaped to resemble big black cocks, the books are covered in a condom-like glossy vinyl jacket while some are purposefully left bare to indicate a bare penis. Each book is twenty pages with one "infected" by HIV, represented by ink that slowly percolates through the book spreading to other pages. Some books have only nineteen pages to indicate a life was lost to the virus. The books not only reflect the statistics, but also visualize that while the virus has no prejudice, the prevention and treatment of HIV is highly racialized.

I made the excess amount of books and condoms available for the public to take with them out of the gallery, as a means to further the discussion on sex education. This gives the audience the time to talk about it in their own environment and at their own pace. It was important to have the books be placeholders for this reason. I didn't want to force the information of HIV & AIDS as society has done. Therefore, a Minimalistic approach was used to design the books and condom. Although it was minimal, I felt the impact was successful.



Figure 4: DePaul Vera, *Evade AIDS*. Artist Book, Collateral Design. Dimensions vary. 2017.

Memorabilia

"Design is most exciting when the author steps out of the scene and allows the elements to live on their own."

-Martin Venezky

Objects find their way to me. I never chase them. They land at my feet on sidewalks. They arrive from events, appear from consignment shops, reveal themselves after text messages. They are used and discarded, begging me to save them from oblivion, hoping I'll make room for them in my storage or on my walls. So many things—maybe too many things—but they're mine. My images are a means of finding visual solace contrasted with hatred.

When I first started collecting content from the Civil Rights Movement, I found myself feeling angry about the kinds of relationships I developed growing up in a small town. I started to question the true intentions of others while also beginning to recognize homophobia among women. A group I previously thought of as allies. I had come to expect certain behaviors from men, as discussed earlier. Despite the fact that women, especially Black women, are largely marginalized by men, they often discriminate against gay men. As a Black, gay man, growing up in a single mother home with six Aunts, I had expected more acceptance than received. I've also realized now that you can't stereotype women.

To label my relationship with my mother as cinematic is an understatement. If it were documented, it would resemble a soap opera, complete with overreactions and exaggerated clichés. At twenty-seven, she took herself to a doctor appointment only to storm out after being advised to abort her baby to save her life because she was hypertensive. As a Southern Baptist abortion was not an option. A week later she was rushed to the hospital for an emergency C-section, her only remaining kidney was removed and I was born three-months premature. Weighing in at one pound and fourteen ounces, I wasn't the daughter she was hoping for but the only child she needed. Not too keen on raising a son, she wanted a little girl to name after herself, to mentor through this man's world. But God blessed her with a son for a reason, to challenge her in unpredictable ways.

Coming to terms with my sexuality was complicated by her religious upbringing and her efforts to pass those beliefs onto me. What was most difficult was finding a way to please her and still live my life. However, there's only so much to tolerate after continually having my pubescent urges branded as an abomination—"Man shall not lay with mankind, as with womankind."⁵

After being met with rejection from both my mother and religion, I developed a deep depression. I was extremely deprived from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) resources while living under my mom's roof and ultimately had no choice but to wait for salvation of my own making. Through all the charades, I found myself frequently daydreaming about 'queering' certain aspects of the preacher's sermon. As I sat in the church pews, I imagined their Blonde eyed Jesus as a submissive twink, pinned down by a Black, muscular man; my vision represented a reversal of race dynamics that could only exist in my imagination.

While in graduate school, this kind of queering of Christianity for example, *Revelation 20:11* (Fig. 5) with its apocalyptic stories, tormented the depths of my soul and left me fearful of the future. This verse in particular—The Judgment of the Dead, sparked a direct link to race and sexuality for me. It states, "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (King James Version, Rev. 20.11). The great white throne referring to the submissive Jesus as before is now dominated by Him, meaning God, an effeminate and masculine Black male, which highlights power roles from gay culture that are in constant ridicule and prejudice.

Larry Icard, a writer and professor in the College of Health Profession, states, "The negative response that Black gays receive from the gay community evolve from attitudes based on sexual racism. That is, sex role stereotypes become linked to racial stereotypes" (Icard 88). Such homophobic attitudes were developed from society's binary way of thinking, which I tried to convey in *Revelation 20:11* by showing the Black women having their backs completely turned away from the gay men, no engagement with each other or the viewer—just nonchalantly existing. The lack of communication is the foundation of the

⁵ Leviticus 18:22

growth of stereotypes and internalized behaviors. Icard continues, "Because of these inequities, Black gays have a greater need to develop their sexual identity in close harmony with their racial identity through positive experiences within the gay community" (Icard 88).

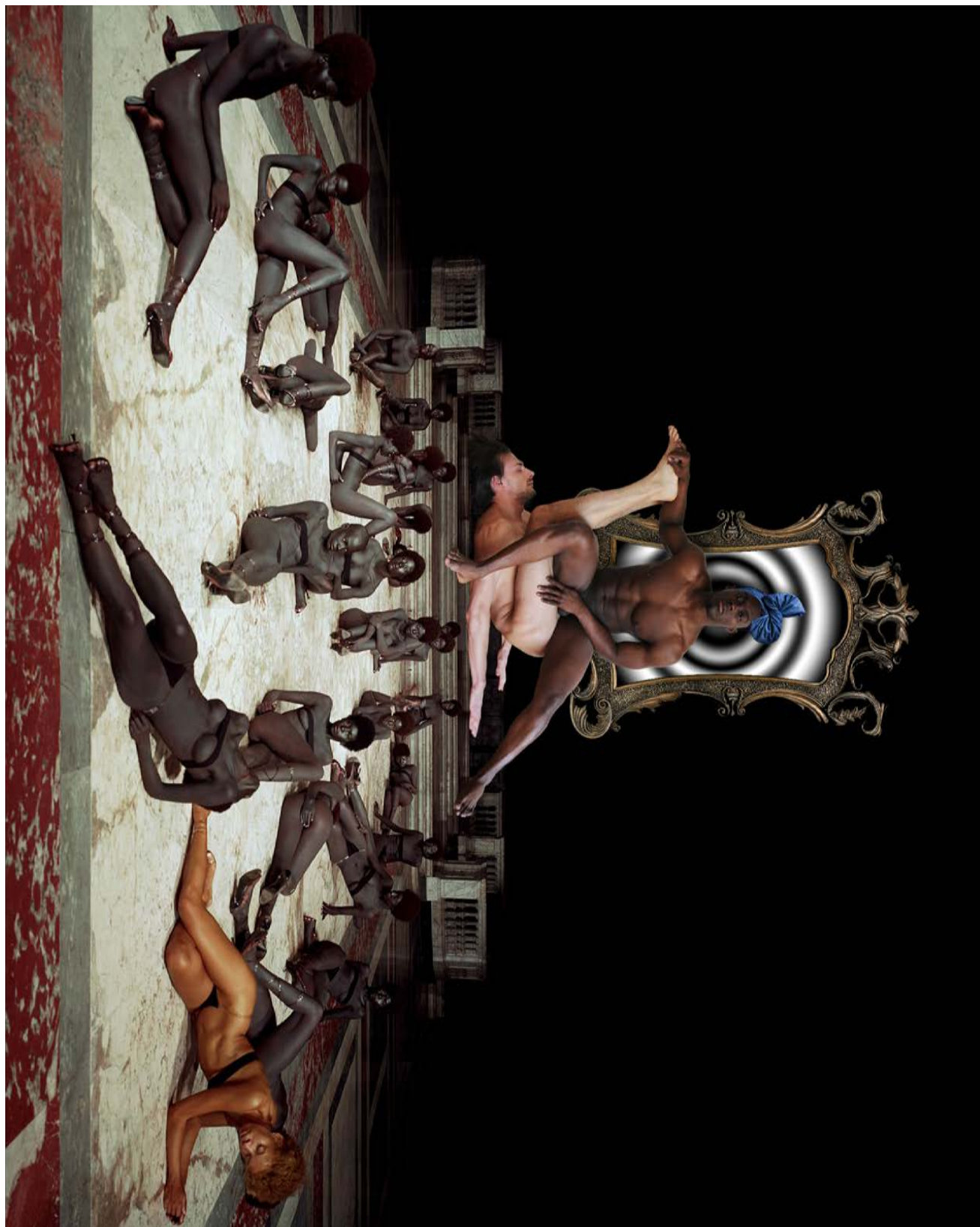


Figure 5: DePaul Vera, *Revelation 20:11* "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them." Digital Collage. Dimensions vary. 2017.

Using collage to combine themes of sexuality and religion in this way created an opportunity for healing. After dealing with issues of spiritual abandonment and cultural alienation, it felt inspiring to use art to illustrate a vernacular and make it mine. My collages thrive on the language around me, from slang and slurs to typical, sometimes stereotypical phrases and conversations, to historical quotes, they all bring a unique perspective to the already compelling images. For example, figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 all reimagine these words, ranging from the periodic self-loathsomeness to the comedic relief of being gay and the uplifting command of Martin Luther King, Jr.

When the denial of my sexuality was at its peak, there wasn't a place I could turn where I wasn't surrounded by White men. Neither reality nor my mind or imaginations were secure. It got to a point where I contemplated suicide to terminate my obsessive thoughts but my religious upbringing prohibited such actions. *"I would've done anything to make those thoughts go away"* (Fig. 6) speaks to this time in my life. An innocent little Black boy in his ruffled Sunday's best, complete with a halo, aggressively holds a knife to his neck while encircled by framed images of White male figures. These figures possess the stereotypical bodies I was expected to glorify because of mass media. Overwhelmed by the excessive quantity of images, the young man is left flustered and hesitates to take his own life.

This suicidal behavior is not uncommon, due to high rates of depression, loneliness and substance abuse in gay communities. We are between 2 and 10 times more likely than straight people to take our own lives (Hottes 5). We're twice as likely to experience extreme depressive phases (PHE 2). Despite the privilege of "choosing our families," (Weston 38) gay men have fewer closer friends than straight people or gay women (Fredriksen-Goldsen 668).

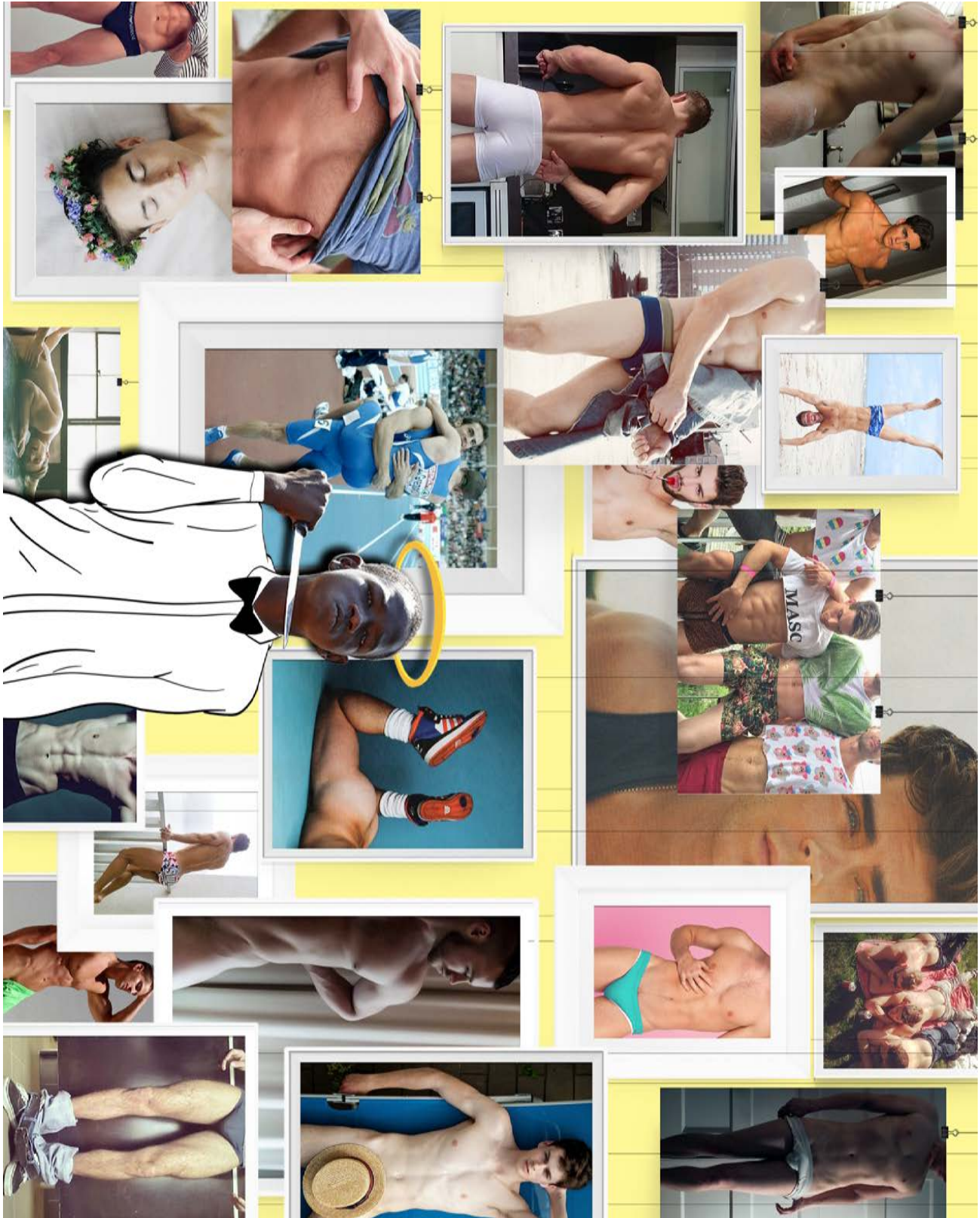


Figure 6: DePaul Vera, *"I would've done anything to make those thoughts go away,"* Digital Collage. Dimensions Vary. 2017.

With my collages that contain brutal content such as the lynching of Blacks or suicidal contemplation, I must take a moment for myself to recoup. I am often saddened while working with such heavy content, which is why I must work with varying concepts to keep myself sane. I do this by using satire to jump from content to content. For example, in *I know what they want, what the Klan really really wants*, (Fig. 7) addition to its explicitness, it possesses a satirical tone. Leading with my subconscious, I imagined Klansmen as disembodied dicks waiting in line to gangbang yet another idealized White body. This imagined sex act visualizes the larger disavowal of Black bodies and the Klan's commitment to keeping the Caucasian blood pure. Co-opting the Klansmen in this imagery while ripping off a Spice Girls lyric,⁶ highlights my use of dark humor to deal with challenging identity politics and my own personal desires. Being able to balance the heaviness of these concepts interchangeably, I feel, holds more conceptual weight and attention in my work; as opposed to the one-liners of my past artwork.

Three years ago while I was working on *Red Rocket* (Fig. 8) my studio practice was feeling stagnant. Using sharpie markers and acrylic paint on canvas, I drew four men gathered around and mesmerized by a large, erect penis, covered in red Ben-Day dots. What was important to me at the time was visual expression, allowing myself to create without censorship, artistically and mentally by drawing at least two to five of these compositions a day for nearly a year and a half. Only then did I start to question the ethnicities of my figures and what it meant for a Black male from the South to illustrate these idealized White bodies.

⁶ "Wannabe" by Spice Girls on *Spice* (1996)



Figure 7: DePaul Vera, *I know what they want, what the Klan really wants*. Digital Collage. Dimensions vary. 2017



Figure 8: DePaul Vera, *Red Rocket*. Sharpie Marker and Acrylic on Canvas. 48x48in. 2015.

When I began including the Black body in my work, it started with self-portraiture but it felt too cynical and vain. It felt unnecessary to have my face, body, or genitals be represented the same way as White bodies because my interest in desire had different dimensions. My lust for darker skin was tamer. Mainly because the available sources mostly portrayed Black bodies as either oppressive or hyper fetishized. Meaning oppressed images were of Blacks suffering (segregation or discrimination). And hyper fetishized images were of isolated Black genitalia. This is not the representation of Black bodies I desired in my collages. My work features full figure nudes in various stances but I have limited access to Black bodies in such stances. This lack of representation sparked a burning desire to portray oppression in a different light.

Speaking to this portrayal, *"I wish I could reach into the past..."* (Fig. 9) isolates an image-still from the Detroit Race Riot in 1943 on a pink and white background while Black hands, in full color, (to indicate a lapse in time) helplessly reaches out to aid a wounded Black man. Despite the smile in contrast to the exhausted body language, these two White, young men were assisting the injured to safety but took a moment to be captured by LIFE Magazine photographer, Joseph Locke (LIFE 98)

Though it lasted only 24 hours, the riot was considered one of the worst riots during the World War II era (LIFE 93). LIFE documents on that hot Sunday evening of June 20th, 1943, a one on one fistfight erupted into a brawl between Whites and Blacks on account of rumors. "Detroiters slugged, clubbed, gouged, stoned, kicked, stabbed and shot each other until 31 were dead, more than 600 injured and 1,800 arrested. This is what happens when, race prejudice, rumor-mongering, and hate propaganda do their worst in a great American City" (LIFE 93).



Figure 9: DePaul Vera, *"I wish I could reach into the past..."*, Digital Collage. Dimensions vary. 2017.

While it may seem that these historic images are a contrast today, it's hard to imply how these images are any different from crime scenes across the country. Therefore, I'm using digital collage to bring awareness to a time of turmoil in contrast with today's reality and how they relate or repeat each other. Finding another relation to these historical images besides connecting with discrimination is often the starting point. However, in "*I wish...*" I was particularly interested in speaking directly to this connection to replicate my inclinations when repeatedly having the hardships of Black History thrown at me during junior high and onward. I wanted to help the Black people shown running away from police and their K-9s. I wanted to help the Black people being sprayed against buildings with fire hoses. I wanted to help the Black people at restaurant bars getting food and drinks dumped on them. I wanted to help the Black people being harassed while making their way to their first day at an integrated school. This mentality of wanting to help others was embedded in me from my mother; however, I believe it is embedded in all humans. What diminishes this embedded quality is the amount of effort people put into acknowledging their privilege and how to leverage it accordingly and respectfully.

This is a stark contrast to most of the consumed history of one of our most important leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His awareness of privilege and using his own as a Black scholar resulted in the termination of legalized racial segregation and discrimination laws in the United States. His impact on my life and the lives of many Black Americans is immeasurable and it's unmissable that without his existence and persistence of pointing out prejudices, biases, unjust laws of racial discrimination and demanding appropriate changes to our Constitution, I'm frightened to imagine how close my life would resemble the historic images of the Civil Rights Movement and before.

I tried to capture the magnitude of Dr. King's impact on my life through "*Let Freedom Ring*," (Fig. 10). In just one image, again, manipulating a married White couple to an interracial one, lying in bed in a cuddled embrace. The chocolate-colored arm is calmly wrapped around his lover, leading the viewer's eye to the Dr. King quote tattooed upon the milky-white skin. Three subtleties are amplified in this; the interracial couple, the tattoo and the wedding ring. All three elements hold much weight pertaining to my desires, meaning they are elements that I long to obtain.

It's common for my collages to contain a voyeuristic approach of an intimate moment. Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, explains in her essay that this voyeuristic approach is considered the male gaze. "The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man..." (Mulvey 25). I'm interested in comparing this analysis and understanding how I use the male gaze back onto the male body and how this controls my attraction to the stereotypical 'beefcake' bodies.



Figure 10: DePaul Vera, *"Let freedom ring."* Digital Collage. Dimensions vary. 2017.

Exhibition

" I don't want to abandon one work for the other, and I don't think I need to sacrifice anything to put my all into either one of them.

-Aaliyah

My thesis exhibition is a place where all my concepts and processes will exist together. Much like how teenagers cover their bedrooms, the gallery will be wallpapered with my collages alongside the stereotypical content I used to create them. Images will play and love one another, and some will fight and argue, creating a constant conflict that resembles the similar internal dispute that I grapple with every day.

Although the images may share a connection, it may not be purposely. The arrangement of the images is either sporadic or inspired by the previous placed image. This method of placement allows for change to occur; now I am not committed to one place or the other. For example, in my mockup of the exhibition (Fig. 11) the word, "Soulmate" has different connotations when it's next to a landscape versus a handmade Ku Klux Klan flag. This contrast creates a visual representation of my subconscious and speaks to my concerns about desire.

Each image, object, poster, ad, note, flyer, and sign has its own history. I expect my audience to bring their own connections and interruptions to the images' conversation; therefore, I want my exhibition to be a place to extend this conversation. A place where people can freely question the relationship between particular combined images and challenge their biases and prejudices. This critical thinking is the final element of my art practice, and it must occur. For if my work does not provoke at least a hint of change in perspectives, then I have failed and must move on to the next artistic process that will lead me to success.



DePaul Vera, *My Soul to Keep*. Digital Exhibition Mockup. 2018.

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Books

Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir*. Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press, 2014.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4. 1988.

Butler breaks down the structures in which gender is performed; it is not inherent, rather it is constructed. "Gender acts" are behaviors and actions that have been falsely attributed to the body but in reality are socially constructed. Using this analysis helped dissect my actions as a Gay, Black male being raised by Black women.

Calloway, Bertha W., and Alonzo Nelson. Smith. *Visions of freedom on the Great Plains: an illustrated history of African Americans in Nebraska*. Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Co., 1998.

Carbado, Devon W. "Privilege." In *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Mae Henderson and E. Patrick. Johnson, 190-212. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005.

Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. "The Performative Palimpsests of Daniel Tisdale." In *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*, 119-130. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." In *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Mae Henderson and E. Patrick. Johnson, 21-51. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005.

Duberman, Martin Bauml. *Paul Robeson*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

In this biography, Duberman writes how Robeson's reputation of a "people's artist" was tarnished. Duberman explains how when Blacks conform to the opinion and criticism of others, but try to maintain their own core beliefs and values, their careers can plummet. He states that Robeson was viewed as the "Good Negro," the proof that the system worked, that there was no significant prejudice in America, however, at the peak of his time, Robeson was censored for his frankness and opposing views on political change. What is relatable for me is my shared experience of coming into my own Blackness only to be disheartened after adapting to the white society around me.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Seattle: Amazon Classics, 1903.

Du Bois coins the term Double-Consciousness and thoroughly explains its cause and effect. This is the constant analyzing of one's self from the perspective of others, specifically Negroes demeaning their own worth because of the weight of white America's societal norms and prejudices. For references, Du Bois analyzes historical situations.

Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'Black' In Black Popular Culture?" In *Black Popular Culture (Discussions in Contemporary Culture)*, a Project by Michele Wallace, edited by Gina Dent, 21-36. New York: The New Press, 1999. 2009.

Hall's main idea in this essay is that a dialogic approach is a better strategy than an essentialist one in relation to black popular culture. He believed that cultural strategies can make a difference and "shift the dispositions of power". Focusing on "black" as the signifier of identity could lead to other forms of cultural oppression. For example, expression of black masculinity could still be oppressive to black women or gay black men. This paper was written over 20 years ago, but it seems that the persistence of essentialism in relation to popular culture and race still

prevails. Certain forms of expression are seen as predominantly white or black and society is still not entirely comfortable with those who are seen as crossing these boundaries.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. 107 & 1042. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.

Icard, Larry. "Black Gay Men and Conflicting Social Identities: Sexual Orientation Versus Racial Identity." In *Social Work Practice in Sexual Problems*, edited by James Gripton and Mary Valentich, 83-94. New York: Haworth, 1987.

Owens, Craig. "Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism." *Men in Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, 219-232. London: Routledge, 1989.

Meyer, Richard. "Most Wanted Men – Homoeroticism and the Secret of Censorship in Early Warhol." In *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, 95-158. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Instead of diving into Warhol's art production, it was nice to learn about his thought process, especially dealing with homoerotic content. This section highlighted how he censored himself but not in the common sense—suppression of artistic expression. He used campy references to hint at gay vernacular, consequently censoring the work from heteronormative structures.

Morgan, Tracy D. "Pages of Whiteness: Race, Physique Magazines and the Emergence of Public Gay Culture," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*, edited by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, 280-297. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Morgan's opening statement, "To be gay is to be white," forced me back into childhood depression and wishing away my Blackness. Her analysis on whiteness lead me to the question, what historical conditions, events, and discourses enabled

the all-but-complete erasure of Black gay men from discussions of gay male culture, sexuality, and community?

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 14-26. 1989.

Mulvey uses Psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to demonstrate the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has strutted film form. In particular to how the male gaze dictates how the female form is presented in society. "The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer of demand by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film." I'm interested in comparing this analysis to how I use the male gaze on the male body and how this controls my attraction to the stereotypical 'beefcake' bodies.

Venezky, Martin J. *It is beautiful -- then gone*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.

Venezky is a graphic designer working in San Francisco, making installation collages that cover walls at a time. In this book, he breaks down his thought process quite romantically and explains his methodology and motivations compared to his influencers. His explanation of "top-down" and "bottom-up" design was crucial to helping me articulate the curation of my collages as well as helped supply a lovely snippet of graphic design history.

Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997.

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Beyoncé. "Forward." *Lemonade*. Sony B01G5W3PTE, 2016, Compact Disc.

Girls, Spice. "Wannabe." *Spice*. Virgin, B000000WCA, 1997, Compact Disc.

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<https://www.thedailybeast.com/cdc-half-of-gay-black-men-will-get-hiv>.

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Fredriksen-Goldsen, Karen I., Charles A. Emlet, Hyun-Jun Kim, Anna Muraco, Elena A. Erosheva, Jayn Goldsen, and Charles P. Hoy-Ellis. "Physical and Mental Health of Lesbian, Gay Male, and Bisexual (LGB) Older Adults: The Role of Key Health Indicators and Risk and Protective Factors." OUP Academic. October 03, 2012. Accessed March 12, 2018.
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