# Imagination and Ancestral Memory in *Memorial Drive* and the Halsey Family Archive

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

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May 12, 2025
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: critical fabulation, digital archives, black memoir

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how memory, specifically in the context of Black women's narratives, is not merely preserved and documented but engaged with through imagination, shaping memory as dynamic. Engaging Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation, this project examines how archival absences, gaps, and silences are countered through imaginative storytelling in both literary and digital spaces. Through a close reading of Natasha Trethewey's memoir *Memorial Drive* as an archive, this thesis argues her texts functions as a site of critical fabulation, weaving together historical records, personal recollections, and imagination to provide a futuristic vision for Black communities built upon active participation with one's ancestral past. Extending this theoretical framework into the digital humanities, this project also includes the creation of an imaginative digital archive titled, "The Halsey Family Archive." This interdisciplinary approach, bridging together African American literary studies, archival studies, and digital humanities, challenges traditional archival practices that position Black life as static rather than a dynamic site of reimagination.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how memory, specifically in the context of Black women's narratives, is not merely preserved and documented but engaged with through imagination, shaping memory as dynamic. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation, I consider how creative and imaginative approaches can fill in archival gaps with care and intention. This project begins with a close reading of Natasha Trethewey's memoir *Memorial Drive,* which I conceptualize as an archive using Hartman's critical fabulation. From there, I extend this theoretical framework to create a digital archive titled, "The Halsey Family Archive," centered around my family's matriarch Annie Pearl Halsey. Ultimately, this thesis asks, "How might imagination help fill in silences and gaps in ancestral memory?"

# Contents

## INTRODUCTION

"You are a Halsey."

This simple assertion, composed of 4 simple words, is the refrain of my father. It has rung through my adolescence and now young adult ears, and it immediately transports me to the small, rural town where my family comes from: Panola, Alabama. My father's side of the family has a yearly tradition of traveling back to our hometown for the Fourth of July. All eight of my father's siblings, along with their spouses and children, return to their home to remember their origins and instill them in the younger generation. The trailer, originally built with 3 rooms, housed several of my aunts and uncles through their childhood. Although a trailer, we tend to refer to it as the "Panola House", or sometimes just "Home." It definitely was not built to accommodate such a large family, and this fact becomes blaringly obvious when we are all there. The chaos of Sunday mornings in the Panola House is something we all regularly look back on with laughter; the trailer is packed to capacity as the aunts cook breakfast, the cousins eat and play obscure video games, and everyone rushes to take a shower first. In my memories, the trailer is always filled with laughter, cooking, blues music, and storytelling. The matriarch of our family, my Big Momma Annie Pearl Halsey, is always sat in the corner in her wheelchair, surrounded by her numerous children and grandchildren. It was within these moments that I learned the inherent value of memory for my family and broadly the Southern Black folk community.

As I adjusted to the chilly air in the Appalachian Mountains during my first semester at Virginia Tech, I immersed myself in several Black Women's memoirs and

couldn't help but think, I wish I was home. These texts were a doorway into the richness of my own individual and ancestral memories. I was, and continue to be, mesmerized by the way these Black women writers interweave their personal narrative into the larger cosmology of their family. I began noticing the structure of these memoirs, how they incorporated references to photographs, music, places, and people, all embedded with memory.

Memory keeping and making in African American communities are integral to preserving histories that have been systematically erased, fragmented, or silences. Specifically, Black women have historically functioned as witnesses and keepers of communal and ancestral memories, while simultaneously weaving their individual memory and narrative into the communal[1]. Yet, these acts of remembrance are not only focused on preservation; they are also about reimagining the past in ways that speak to and engage with the present and future. Black women's custodianship is not only displayed through cultural practices, such as oral storytelling and folklore. Memoirs written by Black women likewise illuminate their role as cultural keepers. These texts, such as Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013) and Lucille Clifton's *Generations* (1976), function as archives of both individual and collective memory, where memory, imagination, and narrative converge. To fill in gaps and give voice to the silenced, these writers imagine and inquire, actively participating with the past and embodying futuristic visions.

[1] See Nash and Pinto, "Strange Intimacies: Reading Black Maternal Memoirs" and Berg, "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It, Warriors Don't Cry, and From the Mississippi Delta"

This thesis specifically examines Natasha Trethewey's memoir *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir* and reads it as an archive. In her memoir, Trethewey returns to her home on Memorial Drive, Atlanta to tell the story of her mother's mother. Trethewey examines her memories of childhood, the South, and her mother through photographs, songs, tape recordings, and numerous official documents, establishing an in-text archive. Interestingly, she interacts with these archival materials through imagination, expanding beyond the materials themselves in an attempt to reconstruct what is missing. Through this lens, this thesis considers how Trethewey's memoir functions as a site of critical fabulation, weaving together historical records, personal recollections, and imagination to provide a futuristic vision for Black communities built upon active participation with one's ancestral past.

To further emphasize memory work as a futuristic endeavor, my thesis features the creation of a digital archival project capturing the life and memory of my grandmother Annie Pearl Halsey. My grandmother grew up and lived in the small rural town of Panola, Alabama. At the age of 19, she suffered a car accident that left her mentally incapacitated for the remainder of her life. Nevertheless, as the matriarch of my family, she played an essential role in maintaining the legacy and history of the Halsey family. By conducting various interviews and collecting photographs and videos of my grandmother and family, I create an archival project that reimagines my late grandmother, allowing for the merging of past and present in a digital space.

This introductory chapter outlines the current scholarship surrounding Black women's memoirs and my primary texts, and I include my theoretical framework. Chapter 1 includes my literary analysis of *Memorial Drive*, examining how Trethewey

journeys through individual and ancestral memory, interrogating and imagining beyond the gaps and silences within them, and how this imaginative method enables the writer to imagine future realities for herself and community. Chapter 2 is a digital family archive titled, "The Halsey Family Archive." I use Omeka, a content management system used for creating digital collections, to create an archive which will contain several photographs and interviews. I apply the same theoretical framework in my analysis of Trethewey's text and my family's archive, reading it as a text in itself.

**Literature Review**

The literary tradition of Black women's autobiographical works has always been concerned with weaving individual and collective narratives together in a forward-thinking manner. The foundational critical text concerning Black women's autobiographical writings is Joanne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography*. Braxton traces the tradition of such writings back to the 1787 publication of "Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon," an autobiographical account advocating for reparations in New York. She claims that this narrative points towards a larger effort of "[regaining a] sense of place in the New World" present in Black women's autobiographical accounts (2). Hence, Black women have historically utilized the autobiography as a space to combine both one's historical, individual, and communal past and future. Autobiography expands beyond passive documentation and becomes a text geared towards concern for the future. Likewise, my thesis explores how Black women's memoirs embody a concern for the future specifically through their use of imagination, which enables the author to actively engage with their ancestors' memory.

Likewise, memoirs function in a similar fashion. For the Black female writer, the memoir is a hybrid form dedicated to the documentation of history complemented by their own creative liberties. Although a subgenre of autobiography, memoir is less concerned with historical accuracy or truths and instead creatively narrates an individual or string of events. Specifically in the 1970s, Black women's writings became even more concerned with the preservation of communal and familial histories in innovative and imaginative ways. For African American writers, confronting one's history means encountering an alarming number of gaps and silences. Black women writers began to "assume radically new forms" and embody a "visionary spirit" in piecing together fragments of history scattered among various memories, photographs, and music (Wall 553). The 1970s saw an increase in more creative and liberatory methods in autobiographical writings, mimicking the nonlinear and fluid characteristics of African American histories and narratives.

However, that criticism surrounding the Black woman writer's use of the memoir form has been long neglected. Scholars have begun to read memoir and other autobiographical texts as archives, and reading archives as texts themselves is a rich critical conversation. The 2019 publication of *Research Methodologies for Auto/biography Studies* encourages scholars in Autobiography studies to embrace interdisciplinary methods and expand their understanding of "texts." Ashley Barnwell and Kate Douglass emphasize "unexamined texts" and explicitly refers to "family archives" (2). Similar moves are made by other interdisciplinary scholars, such as Erica L. Johnson in "Building the Neo-Archive: *Dionne Brand's* A Map to the Door of No Return" and Shelley Trower's "Auto/biographical oral histories, from 'oral memoirs' to

"The Life of Nate Shaw"(1948-1974)." These scholars' work signals a shift in rethinking what constitutes an archive and a text, moving away from rigid categorization and towards a more fluid understanding of how memory, storytelling, and historical records interact. By reading Trethewey's memoir as an archive, this thesis enters this ongoing conversation by examining how Black Women writers' use the memoir form to challenge traditional archival frameworks and imagine beyond its limits.

By analyzing Trethewey's memoir, I aim to highlight specifically her unique use of the memoir as an imaginative tool for engaging with ancestral memory. Trethewey's memoir was published in 2020 and as a result, there is very little scholarship written on the text. As the 19th poet laureate of the United States, her poetry has been widely discussed in terms of American identity, Southern heritage, and contemporary shaping of race. Christie Collins in *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the US South* frames Trethewey's poetry as "the space in which she can wrestle [the] tension that haunts her – [the] combination of love and hate toward the South – and, in doing so, she reclaims her birthplace for herself and for other marginalized voices who might have otherwise been erased from history" (93). Her poetry collections *Native Guard* and *Thrall* have been praised for their ability to reconstruct ideas of American identity and heritage. In *Native Guard*, she reimagines the interiority of the 2nd Louisiana Regiment Native Guard, an all-Black regiment whose "concealed histories" have prevented them from larger recognition. She reimagines their interiority and connects their narrative to her own personal experience growing up in Jim Crow Mississippi and the death of her mother (Collins 93). Hence, Trethewey is deeply committed to highlighting the memories and narratives of African Americans in the South. By acknowledging the critical conversation

surrounding Trethewey's poetry and her method of interrogating memory in the South, this thesis likewise considers how *Memorial Drive* extends these concerns into the realm of personal and historical memoir. While *Thrall* and *Native Guard* reconstructs erased histories through poetic form, her memoir serves as an imaginative archive; one that assembles photographs, official documents, journal entries, and personal recollections, and expands them through the use of imagination.

Presently, most criticism of her memoir appears in literary magazines. A review published in Kirkus Reviews defines Trethewey's return to the crime scene of her mother's murder as a method of "[making] sense" of the tragedy (Kirkus Media). Joshunda Sanders in Poets & Writers Magazine praises the memoir's ability to weave Trethewey and her mother's story into the larger history of African Americans "deliberately omitted from the larger cultural consciousness" (Sanders). In terms of academic scholarship, Trethewey's memoir appears most recently as a case study in "The Role of Multimodal Imagery in Life Writing" by Laura Otis. Otis examines how Trethewey's text invokes sensory experiences in the reader. By weaving transcripts and images in the narrative, Trethewey returns her mother's voice which was taken away through murder (Otis 124). Otis carefully analyzes the role of sensory stimulation in Trethewey's work which fosters a deeper relationship between the reader and writer, and in doing so, Otis makes clear the significance of multimodal artifacts in constructing memories. Trethewey traces the memories of her mother through songs, official documents, and photographs, illuminating how memory itself is not a singular experience but is dynamic. My thesis will expand beyond the current conversations surrounding

Trethewey's poetry and discuss her memoir. Specifically, I highlight how Trethewey uses the memoir form specifically as an archive infused with imagination.

**Theoretical Framework – Saidiya Hartman's "Critical Fabulation"**

My thesis project is largely concerned with archives and imagination in two respects. As I engage with Trethewey's memoir, I am reading her text as an archive, a collection of artifacts through which she builds imagination from, allowing her to interact with her personal, ancestral, and collective memories. Furthermore, I read Trethewey's memoir alongside the creation of my digital archive. Like Trethewey, I confront the silences and gaps contained within my family's memories of my grandmother and imagine beyond archival materials such as interviews and photographs.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is built from Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation." She first defines this term in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts" where she explores the idea of truth in archive and what kinds of methodologies scholars can utilize to combat the violence of the archive. In the context of the transatlantic slave trade, Hartman encounters Venus, an unnamed girl whose presence in the archive is marked by both silence and erasure. Through her method of critical fabulation, Hartman seeks to both acknowledge archival violence and imagine what cannot be recovered of Venus's narrative. She posits several questions to herself and archivists who encounter similar Venus figures in their work, but one sticks out in particular: "Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?" (11). Hartman seeks to interrogate the archive as an authoritative way of knowing. The archive is a means of understanding the past and shaping narratives of history, yet it is incomplete and lacking; the story of Venus is lost and perhaps cannot be found through the archival materials

themselves. How, Hartman asks, can she recover the story of Venus and broadly the narratives of those who are left out of official historical accounts? Is it even possible? Venus, then, symbolizes the lost and silences narratives of the marginalized and oppressed. This leads Hartman to explore other avenues of reckoning with the silences and gaps in the archive through her method of critical fabulation.

Her method of critical fabulation is the critical examination of the ordering of events. To push at the limits of the archive, she inquires and imagines. The possibilities of hearing and seeing Venus, which are built from the archival materials themselves, are made manifest through imagination. Hartman denotes "fabula" as the "basic elements of story, the building blocks of narrative" (11). It is to this narrative that Hartman will critically interrogate, complicate, and call into the question it's "factual truth":

> By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object. (Hartman 11)

Hartman simultaneously critiques and reimagines history and narrative through her method of critical fabulation. Instead of accepting the narrative as "factual" history that the archive may suggest, Hartman dismantles and reorganizes the narrative elements. She jeopardizes and challenges the authoritative account established through the archive and

imagines what could have been. In turn, this allows Hartman to utilize imaginative storytelling as a means of both disrupting the supposed authority of the archive and imagining possibilities expanding outside of the archive. Hartman suggests imaginative play as a practice to rethink historical narratives and archival accounts. Importantly, imagination is not the initial step of this process; Hartman makes it clear that imagination comes after encountering and questioning around archival materials. Fragments and/or any other "incomplete" items do not stop Hartman's inquiry in the archives. In fact, Hartman uses this opportunity to continue and expand her line of inquiry through imagination.

Even as Hartman emphasizes the incompleteness of the archive, full of silences and absences, she simultaneously asserts that archival silences should be respected. The intention of critical fabulation is "not to give voice to the slave," Hartman writes, "but rather to imagine what cannot be verified" (12). The narrative created through critical fabulation is "a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive" (Hartman 12). Critical fabulation may result in more questions than answers, more what-ifs than what-is. Especially in the context of slavery, Hartman wrestles with the unknowability present within the archive, a direct result of "the irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade" (12). Even so, the act of using imaginative narration may produce a similar kind of violence:

> My account replicates the very order of violence that it writes against by placing yet another demand upon the girl, by requiring that her life be made useful or instructive, by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history. We all

> know better. It is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes. But in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet, our lives are coeval with the girl's in the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom. In the meantime, it is clear that her life and ours hang in the balance. (Hartman 14)

Hartman returns to critical fabulation, its uses and faults, in her 2021 essay "Intimate History, Racial Narrative," which explores how she implements the concept in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments.* This is a text where Hartman pieces together archival materials displaying the lives and experiences of young Black girls in the 19th and 20th century. She uses her method of critical fabulation here to "attend to what exceeds the frame, the something else, and the what-might-be" (Hartman 131).

She continues troubling the idea that historical narratives and methods - particularly those that are established through the archive - are authorities of truth. When viewing the archive in terms of "the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved," Hartman argues for an inquisitive method that interrogates and goes beyond the silences, gaps, and absences in the archive, which seem to be especially prevalent in in regard to these communities. (xiii). Hartman writers, "Making new narratives entails a creative practice untethered or indifferent to the rules of the historical guild, and directed by the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus" (130). Again, there is the risk of going beyond the archive, resulting in several questions. Hartman seeks to find out "what might be possible if I chose not to leave these lives as I found them in state archives and newspaper articles, but instead imagined another kind of existence" (130). How might

these archival materials, Hartman asks, exist and convey other narratives through imagination?

Importantly, Hartman's use of "new" here does not imply historically false or fantastical. Instead, she challenges the traditional rules of history as an academic discipline and methodology. The counter-narratives manifested through critical fabulation should not be taken as "discovering new documents" but rather an engagement "with extant archival materials critically and creatively" (129). In fact, she "[embraces] the document" to determine "what [she] might do with official documents, given the limits, the lies, the omissions, the fabrications" (129). She "learned to work with the constitutive mess of the archive, to creatively disorder the institutional fictions and the violent abstractions authorized as fact and truth" (129). Thus, in "Intimate History, Radical Narrative," Hartman clarifies her method of critical fabulation, not as a method of establishing new narratives, but using archival materials as the foundation for imagining other narratives and histories.

Hartman's two articles are both full of questions and inquiries about archival research, its limits and violence. Nevertheless, she illuminates the possibilities of encountering the archive through imagination and narrative, which allow for a more expansive and liberatory engagement with archival materials. Following in Hartman's footsteps, scholars use and examine critical fabulation in archival research about the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. In "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved," Stephanie E. Smallwood builds from Hartman's methodology to reflect on her own interacts with the slavery archive, exploring what counter-narratives to the archive might look like. Other scholars challenge Hartman's

approach to the archive and the construction of the archive of slavery entirely. David Kazanjian in "Freedom's Surprise: Two Paths Through Slavery's Archives" writes, "My concern here is that, despite the caution against naively giving 'voice to the slave,' the unverifiable and the empirical conflate" (135). Kazanjian instead argues for rethinking the slavery archive to *archives* plural*,* encouraging scholars to seek out counter-narratives that might already exist. Other scholars have utilized her method in other historical contexts outside of transatlantic slavery, such as Sarah Levin-Richardson and Deborah Kamen in "Epigraphy and Critical Fabulation: Imagining Narratives of Greco-Roman Sexual Slavery," who employ Hartman's method to Greco-Roman epigraphs. The diversity in scholars interacting with Hartman's methodology demonstrates its impact across disciplines and historical contexts. Whether it be used to critique, employ, or expand her framework, critical fabulation indeed shapes how researchers approach archival silences, absences, and narratives of the oppressed. This ongoing scholarly conversation highlights both the importance and challenges of reimagining history, crafting counter-narratives, and utilizing alternative archival practices.

As Hartman encourages for a rethinking of archives broadly, I specifically extend her method of critical fabulation to the memoir as an archive. Through my conceptualization of the memoir as an archive, I inquire in what ways does critical fabulation – even though it might not be explicitly named - appear and function as memoir authors interacts with archival materials in the texts? How might Black women writers, such as Trethewey, rethink archives and the dynamics of memory through the memoir form? Moreover, I utilize critical fabulation in the creation of my digital family archive. By employing Hartman's critical fabulation, I explore the possibilities of

memory keeping and making when encouraged to go beyond the archival materials themselves.

Chapter 1 contains my literary analysis of *Memorial Drive*, using a theoretical framework built from Hartman's critical fabulation. This framework will illuminate how Trethewey utilizes memoir as an imaginative way to presently engage with the memory of her mother, conceptualizing memory as dynamic and living. Through this lens, I demonstrate how Trethewey's narrative not only reflects on personal history but also embodies a futuristic approach that imagines alternative realities and narratives for her late mother. Chapter 2 extends the theoretical framework established in Chapter 1 to explore the creation of a digital family archive. I posit that the creation of a digital family archive not only enhances the way I interact with the themes of ancestral memory and imagination found in Trethewey's memoir; I also demonstrate how the incorporation of digital humanities in literary studies reveals the potential for engaging with personal and collective narratives. Titled, "The Halsey Family Archive," I include three interviews and six family photographs. I become part of a larger tradition of Black women writers' multimodal approaches to memory found in their memoirs.

Even though this thesis focuses on imagination Trethewey's memoir, I intend to signal the need for deeper analysis of how Black women writers broadly utilize the memoir as imaginative tools. My analysis of *Memorial Drive* and the creation of a digital family archive aim to demonstrate the necessity of continued engagement with how Black women writers engage with their ancestral pasts and make them relevant for the present moment, Together, my interdisciplinary approach utilizes the rich literary tradition present in Black Women's memoirs as a tool of analysis, and it identifies the

ongoing effort of memory work within African American communities in the 21st century.

## CHAPTER ONE – NASTAHSA TRETHEWEY'S *MEMORIAL DRIVE*

Natasha Trethewey in her 2020 essay "You Are Not Safe in Science; You Are Not Safe in History" explains the foundations of her craft:

> In my work I turn often to photographs and other documentary and archival evidence, seeking to describe not only the "luminous details" of history, to borrow Pound's phrase, but also to focus in on what Roland Barthes referred to as the "punctum"—the thing that pricks you, wounding you into recognition. (14)

Born in Mississippi, Trethewey's concern with place, narrative, and memory are conveyed through her work. In the same essay, Trethewey asks herself, "what's been left out of the historical record of my South and my nation?" and seeks to answer this through her works, such as *Native Guard* (2006) and *Thrall* (2012). In the same year she writes "You Are Not Safe in Science," Trethewey publishes her memoir *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir* (2020), where Trethewey's concern of memorialization and record presented in her article is just as prevalent and given much more depth. Instead of interacting with the memory of Black Civil War soldiers as she does in *Native Guard*, she engages with the memory of her late mother. In 1985, Trethewey's mother, Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough, was shot inside of her home at the hands of her ex-husband. Trethewey, only nineteen and in college, receives a call that her mother has been shot, and returns home to Memorial Drive, a street in Atlanta, Georgia. It is from "a wound that never heals" that causes Trethewey to travel back through time, through her memories and amongst photographs, music, and her own mother's journal entries (4). Memory, the foundation upon which the memoir form is supported on, is the vehicle for Trethewey to engage, preserve, and reimagine her mother's life and legacy. By weaving together

fragmented collections, photographs, and official documents, Trethewey's memoir becomes a futuristic archive through which she imagines beyond the remains of her individual and collective memory. In doing so, she transforms memory into a dynamic process of meaning-making.

Trethewey's interaction with memory points towards a larger tradition of memory work amongst Black women writers. In "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison details her method of memory work in the craft of writing fiction. Much of Morrison's literature dealt with narratives of the past, such as slavery and the antebellum period in *Beloved* and the Harlem Renaissance in *Jazz.* As a result, she heavily relied on memory as they are "the subsoil of [her] work." However, memories alone will not be sufficient to create interiority of her characters. She claims, "Only the act of the *imagination* can help me" (91-92, my emphasis). By combining imagination and memory, Morrison performs what she calls "literary archeology," which is the process of "[journeying] to a site to see what remains were left behind and [reconstructing] the world that these remains imply (92). The site of memory is conceptualized as this liminal space where binaries of fact/fiction, absence/presence, and most importantly imagination/memory converge. It allows Morrison as a writer to conjure narratives, worlds, and histories from the "remains" left behind.

While Morrison examines the sites of memory present in early slave narratives, I expand this framework to Trethewey's contemporary memoir. In *Memorial Drive,* sites of memory are represented through various mediums such as photographs, music, official documents, and the journal entries of Trethewey's mother. Instead of appearing as static

objects that define a particular point in time, Trethewey conceptualizes them as materials that expand beyond the time and space they originate from and interact with them in a dynamic way. Trethewey establishes the dynamic nature of memory in the memoir's prologue. She opens with a reoccurring dream she has three weeks following her mother's death. Trethewey and her mother are walking side by side when a strange man passes by them, causing Trethewey to notice a quarter size hole in her mother's forehead. Her mother asks, "Do you know what it means to have a wound that never heals?" (Trethewey 4). This wound functions as the "punctum" through which Trethewey begins her journey through personal, familial, and historical memory as a means of confronting the past. It functions as the entryway to the various sites of memory that Trethewey will explore in her memoir. Furthermore, this wound, a literal reference to the manner in which Trethewey's mother passed away, is also a symbol for how the accumulation of past trauma in Trethewey's family and the larger African American community persists. Thus, Trethewey situates her and her mother's narrative within a broader critique of oppressive systems in America. Embedded within this wound is the traumatic death of Trethewey's mother, the trauma and erasure of African American history and lived experience in the South.

The sites of memory – photographs, official documents, journal entries – become the fertile ground upon which critical fabulation is used. These artifacts become a textual archive in Trethewey's memoir, allowing her to engage with the memory of her mother, her family, and the South. However, these artifacts within themselves can only take Trethewey so far. Surrounding these artifacts are moments of silence and absence, and Trethewey combats them through imagination. Instead of constructing a false or fact less

history, she reimagines and gestures towards the lives and future possibilities of engagement with the South build upon engagement with the past. Trethewey makes it clear that it is not truth or certainty that she hopes to gain by returning to these sites of memory. She is attempting to "make meaning" of the past: "Perhaps that's the trick the mind plays in grappling to make meaning of events of the past, to find a narrative thread, to read – looking back – the signs we did not pay attention to in the moment" (Trethewey 57). By embracing imagination as a means of engaging with the past, Trethewey acknowledges that memory is not about retrieving a fixed or absolute truth. Instead, it is about continuously interpreting and reinterpreting history and memory.

For Trethewey, memories manifest themselves as paths that she takes, following them backwards and seeing what she could not before; this is the very act of remembering. Yet, she does not merely remember but questions and wonders along the path. For example, she recalls a "scene" from when her and her mother first moved to Atlanta:

> I watch her as the sky goes dark, streetlamps just coming on outside the small window. There must be someone else in the apartment, someone there to watch over me while she is gone, but I don't remember that part. I know only that I will sleep and in the morning she will be there again. So I stay awake until she leaves, wearing the uniform required for her job as a cocktail waitress in Undergrad Atlanta: black leotard and jeans, a heavy brass bullet slung low around her slender hips. I see it so clearly now, my younger mother bending to kiss me, the bullets' cold metal brushing my hand, her body ringed in the objects of her undoing. (52-53)

In this passage, Trethewey simultaneously preserves this memory of her mother and confronts the gap within it. She explicitly acknowledges the limitations of her remembering, admitting that she "doesn't remember" someone else being in the apartment. The absence of clarity and certainty in her memory invites Trethewey to

imagine, as she uses what she does know to reconstruct the memory. Instead of striving to establish a sense of certainty, she infers that "there must" be someone else present, shaping memory as containing both what is remembered and what is forgotten. Trethewey's need to make sense of the past remains even though she cannot grasp the exact details of this memory. This is evident as she follows her inference with what she does know – "I know only that I will sleep" – which emphasizes the selective and fragmentary nature of memory. By claiming she can see the memory clearly, Trethewey suggests the transcendental nature of memory, where the very act of remembering bridges the gap between past and present. Remembering, for Trethewey, goes beyond merely recollecting events and becomes a dynamic, interpretive act. She saturates the scene with meaning that was not fully accessible in the memory's present moment, such as the symbolic nature of the bullet pointing towards the object responsible for her mother's death. Trethewey's imaginative interaction with memory appears alongside multiple artifacts in her memoir, including photographs, her mother's journal entries, and official documents.

**Photographs: Memories Beyond the Frame**

Following the prologue, Trethewey begins her text with an image of her mother: the last photograph taken of her mother before she was murdered. It is a formal portrait of her mother, forty years old, taken at a mass-market studio. In the photo, she is wearing "a long-sleeved black sheath, the high collar open at the throat." She's not looking at the camera nor smiling, her face "as inscrutable as it always was – her high, elegant forehead, smooth and unlined, a bill-board upon which nothing is written." Trethewey wonders, "Perhaps she intended to look back on it years later and say, 'That's where it began, my

new life" which is a thought that fills Trethewey with "despair," so much so that "for years [she] chose other stories to tell [herself]" (6). Although not explicitly said, it's implied that Trethewey told herself counter-stories to cope with the false sense of hope embedded in the photograph. Trethewey's use of "inscrutable" to define her mother is interesting, as she is implying that there is something impossible to understand or interpret about her mother. There is no meaning inscribed or inherent within the photograph itself. Similarly, Trethewey ascribes the absence of meaning onto her mother's forehead, which is compared to a "bill-board upon which nothing is written." Trethewey appears to be desperately looking to gain meaning or understanding from this last photograph, arising from the nonsensical and irrational murder of her mother. This is what leads Trethewey to wonder, using the imaginative language of "perhaps," to create meaning. Like Morrison, she navigates through what the photograph leaves her with – the remains – and uses imagination to fill in the silence.

Trethewey's imagination around this photograph points towards the issue of silences from her mother's death among the material world, which is inextricably linked to memory. She returns to her home in Atlanta, driven by the need to interact with silences similar to the one found in the photograph of her mother. Trethewey's decision to leave Atlanta, following her mother's death, became a "mute avoidance of [her] past, silence and willed amnesia buried deep in [her] like a root" (9). The last time she was in Atlanta was when her mother was murdered, when the apartment complex was covered with yellow police tape and the sidewalk contained the "faded chalk outline" of her mother's body. Yet, Trethewey notices that "nothing in the landscape today bears evidence to any of that, though everything seems to carry the imprint of loss" (10). The

only constant is Stone Monument looming in the distance, serving to "remind [her] what is remembered here and what is not" (Trethewey 10). Trethewey wrestles with the issue of narrative here. She points out Stone Mountain, a historical landmark which commemorates Confederate soldiers and Civil War generals, including the infamous Robert E. Lee. The historical narrative of the Confederacy is one that has erased and overshadowed that of African Americans living in the South. The Confederates pushed to maintain the system of slavery in the Southern states and lost the Civil War; Yet their legacy remains long after, while the material evidence of Trethewey's mother does not. The apartment complex is characterized by absence and loss. Nassim W. Balestrini reads this moment's function as "a visual stimulus for Trethewey's personal association between collective memory, as materialized in the Civil War monument, and the erasure of her late mother" (355). Hence, her mother is left out of the larger historical narrative represented in the geographical landscape of the South. This pushes Trethewey to return to the past, both geographically and immaterially through memory: "That's what's drawn me back: the hidden, covered over, nearly erased. I need now to make sense of our history, to understand the tragic course upon which my mother's life was set and the way my own life has been shaped by that legacy" (Trethewey 11). The past is not gone, but it is not in clear view either. Trethewey's goal is to bring back the past narratives of her mother, her family, and the broader African American community back into focus. By highlighting the legacy of these past narratives, Trethewey can understand and make sense of the present. She explicitly draws an epistemological link between what has happened between what currently is.

Interestingly, Trethewey paints the past as a ghostly figure that continuously manifests itself in the present. She weaves the ghostly presence of the past with the haunt of her past trauma. She recalls a story she heard countless times as a young girl: the night the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in her family's yard. She claims night "lives in [her] memory as experience," even though she was too young to remember it.

> The men arrive late in the evening, long after supper: my parents still sitting together in the den, watching television; my grandmother and my uncle Charlie in the kitchen, washing the last of the dishes. All of them dead now, I see them moving through the house like ghosts. Even I am a ghost in this story – an infant self of whom I have no recollection, my inscrutable face still white as my father's. My grandmother peers through the blinds at the group of them – seven or eight men in white robes carrying a man-size cross; in the bedroom my mother watches over me, the blackout curtains drawn, all the lights in the house extinguished so that, but for the faint glow of a hurricane lamp in the corner, we are all in darkness; my father and uncle, rifles in hand, waiting silently in the front room as, outside, the fire ignites. (36)

Trethewey presents memory as boundless to time, where past and present converge, creating a lens through which she interprets and makes sense of the past. This memory is told through present tense, as if it is currently happening. In an almost paradoxical way, Trethewey actively "sees" her family members, even though they are dead. Trethewey's use of "ghost" here to explain her and her family members' presence in the memory is especially intriguing. Ghosts are a common literary trope in Southern literature, especially Southern Gothic literature, and often communicate "the past's persistent refusal to be buried" (Anderson 121). However, Trethewey extends this framework by asserting that these ghosts, as well as the act of engaging with them, are vital means of survival. For Trethewey, seeing is acknowledging. She writes, "In my grandmother's house the act of remembering…was meant to ensure my future safety, protection gained

through knowledge and the vigilance it brings, a certain hyperawareness" (Trethewey 36).

Indeed, Trethewey utilizes her memoir to bear witness to the simultaneous traumas occurring in Black southern life: the sociocultural as conveyed through the presence of the KKK, a swell as her own subjectivity as a mixed-race girl in rural Mississippi. As the title of his article puts it, William M. Ramsey refers to Trethewey as a "Black Chronicler of the Imagined South," as her work interrogates the marginalization of Black folks in dominant Southern narratives. He writes, "Black writers ghost-haunted by the southern past are highly wary of being possessed by the grip of a mythical mystique that marginalized black experience into historical invisibility" (122). Furthermore, Trethewey's relationship with the southern past is complicated as she simultaneously critiques and appreciates it. As Christie Collins puts it, Trethewey "[wrestles] this tension that haunts her" as a means of "[reclaiming] her birthplace for herself and for other marginalized voices who might have otherwise been erased from history" (93). In order to tell the story of her mother, Trethewey has to communicate a larger narrative about the Black community and Black life in the South, whom have been neglected from the "official" record. In her memoir, these narratives are interwoven and unable to be separate and paints a parallel between silences in her own mother's story and in larger authoritative structures of "truth."

Moreover, by reading Trethewey's memoir as an archive, it becomes clear that haunting serves as a means to knowing and engaging with these materials. This is central to Avery Gordon's text *Ghostly Matters,* where she argues that the ghost and the act of

haunting is an epistemological method. When performing archival work on marginalized groups and individuals, Gordon writes, "haunting is essential to this laborious work. After all, we need to know that something is missing in order to even begin to look for it or its dispersion of gestures anywhere, in the archive or in the imaginary zone. The ghostly haunt gives precisely this notification" (178). In fact, haunting operates in a similar manner in Trethewey's memoir. It alerts her to the absence within her memories and silences embedded in the archival materials she interacts with, compelling her to imagine what these absences and silences mean. The ghostly presence of her mother, along with the haunting past of the South, serves as signals to these gaps. Haunting, then, becomes an active force in *Memorial Drive,* which drives Trethewey to

As Giorgia de Cenzo explores in "Natasha Trethewey: The Native Guard of Southern History," Trethewey's concern with remembrance of the past reflects a larger tradition of Black women as custodians of memory, history, and narrative. He points to her poem "Theories of Time and Space" which opens Trethewey's collection *Native Guard.* Giorgia reads Trethewey's return to Gulfport, Mississippi as an "archetypal journey, back to the 'buried/terrain of the past'" (21). Trethewey's return also aligns with Morrison's metaphor of the Mississippi River flooding as the land remembering: "'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be…Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'" (99).

Trethewey's use of imaginative storytelling is perhaps most evident when she draws on police reports and her mother's own diary entries. Trethewey utilizes these artifacts as the foundation for imagination, confronting the limits of what they can tell her and instead questioning and wondering around them. Trethewey points to the limitations that these artifacts possess within themselves, suggesting that a deeper involvement with them is necessary. For example, she refers to a photograph of her and her mother, one of the last ones taken before they left Mississippi. She begins her recall of the image by wondering what is outside of it, not captured in the frame: "Perhaps my father is there, behind the camera. Perhaps he is not" (50). Within the photograph, both Trethewey and her mother are dressed in purple, and a beautiful Afro adorns her mother's head. However, Trethewey points out a blemish in the photograph:

> There's a flaw in the picture, a white spot at the center of her face from which she already seems to be disappearing. If you were to multiply that spot, double its size every year for twelve years – beginning with our arrival in Atlanta – by the end of that time she'd be completely gone: only the space where she had been would remain, a hole like the shape of her Afro, or the sun. (50)

Trethewey's careful examination of this photograph reveals how she wields imagination to confront gaps and silences often inherent in archival materials. As her interaction with the image begins with what cannot be seen, Trethewey establishes the limitations inherent to the photograph itself. She then transitions to the absence conveyed through the photograph: the white spot. This blemish becomes a metaphor for her mother's gradual erasure, both in the literal sense of her absence from Trethewey's life and in the symbol sense of her mother's diminishing presence in the collective narrative. As Trethewey is concerned with highlighting African American subjectivity in the South, this white spot also communicates the "white-washing" of Southern African American

histories and narratives. This is why imagination is necessary for Trethewey; by engaging in this imaginative narrative process, Trethewey moves beyond the surface of the photograph to interrogate its deeper implications. The photograph is no longer a static artifact but instead is transformed into a dynamic site of memory and meaning. Through this framework, Trethewey not only critiques the limitations of archival materials such as photographs but she also demonstrates the generative potential of imagination. The act of wondering what lies beyond the photograph's frame and interrogating what is present within the photograph allows her to confront the complexities of her mother's presence and absence. It is through imagination that Trethewey envisions archival materials as futuristic tools, allowing her to imagine futures, reinterpret the past, and establish a bridge between them.

**The Words of Her Own Mother: Journal Entries as Grounds for Imagination**

Trethewey includes her mother's last journal entry, written on the morning of her death on a yellow legal pad. In it, Trethewey's mother details her experience with The Council for Battered Women, a shelter dedicated to women suffering from domestic abuse. She reached out to them as she was desperate to escape from her abusive husband. Trethewey's mother experiences a range of emotions; she is unsure at first, frustrated with her husband's refusal to cooperate in couples therapy, and her hope in the possibility of refuge in the shelter (Trethewey 131-140). The journal entry ends abruptly with Trethewey's mother noting down the rules and expectations of the shelter. Trethewey's own voice returns, and she writes, "That's as far as she got. In the midst of writing, she must have still had hope – if not absolute faith – that her story was a story of escape, of starting anew, that there was a happy ending still ahead of her, that she was indeed living

it" (140). Tragically, Trethewey knows her mother dies shortly after composing this journal entry. However, instead of using this archival material as an indication of what is to come, Trethewey instead reconstructs her mother's interiority and creates an alternative reality, where her mother is successfully liberated from her abusive marriage. This alternative reality counters the narrative where Trethewey's mother is a victim of abuse and violence. In this counternarrative, Trethewey's mother reclaims her agency and subjectivity.

Not only does Trethewey read her mother's journal entries; she has access to her mother's voice through audio recordings. Trethewey locates a tape recording of her mother speaking five years after her death. Trethewey comes to a disturbing revelation that the artifacts containing the presence of her mother "had already begun to dissipate" (155). The tape, then, offers Trethewey the opportunity to "resurrect and keep some part of her this time…[rehearse] the memory of her voice" to perhaps "learn to imitate it" (156). When Trethewey hears her mother's voice, she is immediately struck with an image of her: "I could see her then in the glow of hurricane lamps on the dresser, applying lipstick, her back to me, her face reflected in the mirror. I could see.." (156). Alongside her mother's journals, the tape recording offers another intimate fragment of her presence, allowing Trethewey to hear her mother's words, bridging the gap between absence and remembrance. This introduces a new dimension of her engagement with the past, transforming memory from something abstract to something immediate and embodied. By listening, Trethewey not only sees an image of her mother; she feels as if she is bringing her back to life through resurrection. This suggests that the recording allows Trethewey to momentarily recover what has been lost intellectually, emotionally,

and physically. The vivid detail of this image of her mother – "the glow of hurricane lamps on the dresser, applying lipstick, her back to me, her face reflected in the mirror" – suggests that memory is not simply an act of looking back. Trethewey actively re-experiences the past in the present moment. The repetition of present tense "I could see," reinforces how immediate and immersive this moment feels for Trethewey. Furthermore, this embodiment is emphasized through Trethewey's hope to "learn to imitate" her mother's voice. Trethewey suggest she can internalize the memory of her mother through her own body, implying that remembering is not just mental recollection; it can be rehearsed, spoken, and physically enacted.

Simultaneously, however, Trethewey conveys the fragility of these artifacts. Her excitement of reconnecting with her mother through sound quickly turns into another moment of loss. Her attempt to preserve her mother's voice is ultimately destroyed when the tape breaks:

> After I'd pressed Play my mother came back to me for less than thirty seconds before the tape snagged in the machine, her voice garbled, and stopped. I took the cassette out and wound the tape gently, flattening the length of it as I went. But each time I put it back in to play it would catch before I could hear her utter another word. I kept taking it out, smoothing it over and over, stretching it between my fingers until the worn tape snapped in my hands. Had I waited, I might have been able to save it. The length of tape that held her voice has been as tenuous as the faith that held Orpheus and Eurydice together as he tried to lead her out of the underworld. In my impatience, I had severed it" (156-157).

The tape, like memory, is delicate and unstable. Although Trethewey can momentarily hear her mother through the tapes, this presence is fleeting and can be lost. She struggles to smooth and rewind the tape, conveying her desire to recover her mother's voice. However, this moment shows that the tape, like memory, cannot be perfectly preserved. Trethewey explicitly acknowledges that her own impatience led to

the tape's destruction. It is a painful moment of irony: the more urgently she grasps, physically and emotionally, at the memory of her mother, the more elusive it becomes. This moment serves as a painful reminder that memory, whether it is contained mentally or through physical artifacts such as a tape recording, is never guaranteed to last. It is fragile and fleeting.

**Challenging Fact and Truth in Official Documents**

Similarly, Trethewey incorporates official documents in her memoir. Instead of appearing as statis artifacts proclaiming truth, these documents operate as active sites of engagement, allowing Trethewey to confront and reshape the memory of her mother. Her use of these documents reveals their inherent limitations. Not only does Trethewey contextualize them, but she also exposes the ways in which institutional records often obscure and reduce personal histories to mere facts, which in turn often erase the lived complexities of their lives. Trethewey encounters these documents years later after her mother's death. They range from officiating her mother's death to statements made by her mother's abuser, and Trethewey explores how memory is contained yet simultaneously left out of these documents. She writes, "I would read in the court documents that he told his psychologist at the VA hospital he'd brought a gun with him, planning to kill me right then and there, on the track around the football field, to punish my mother. He hadn't, he said during his trial, because I'd waved and spoken kindly to him. I did not yet know how that scene would haunt me over the years – before I'd ever read his words – my gesture toward him some kind of betrayal of my mother" (144). Here, Trethewey juxtaposes the legal record of her stepfather's statement with her own haunting memory of the event. She fills in the gaps of her own memory and the court

documents by weaving them together, demonstrating how personal memory interacts with and resists official narratives. Moreover, Trethewey's understanding of her own personal memory shifts as her stepfather's statement reframes what once felt like a betrayal – her wave – into a moment with unintended and unforeseen significance. This suggests that official documents not only record history but have the power to shape and rewrite one's own understanding of personal experience. Trethewey emphasizes this through the phrase "before I'd ever read his words," conveying the dynamic nature of memory. It is not static but instead is continually reshaped.

Trethewey continues to weave her own voice alongside these official documents. She includes a recording of a phone call between her mother and stepfather:

> *The State v. Joel T. Grimmette*
> Tape of Conversation of June 4, 1985
> [*My mother must have had trouble engaging the device, so the conversation had already started when the recording begins.]* (176).

Interestingly, Trethewey calls into question the implied authority of these official documents. She attempts to provide context and explanation for the tape's abrupt start, which begins in the middle of a conversation. Most importantly, Trethewey does not *know* why the tape begins in this way. She imagines, conveyed through her use of "must." Her imagination serves as resistance to the supposed finality of official accounts. Instead of simply reproducing these official records in her memoir, Trethewey actively reshapes them, intertwining her voice into their gaps and uncertainties. This moment highlights how official documents are often incomplete as they fail to capture the full scope of lived experience. Trethewey's decision to imagine echoes Morrison's assertion that imagination is just as credible as so-called factual sources, challenging the authority

of official documents and narratives: “the scholarship of the biographer and the literary critic seems to us only trustworthy when the events of fiction can be traced to come publicly veritable fact. It’s the research of the ‘Oh, yes, this is where he or she got it from’ school, which gets its own credibility from excavating the credibility of the sources of the imagination, not the nature of the imagination” (93). Similarly to Morrison, Trethewey resists the supposed authority and completeness of official documents. Morrison critiques the privileging of veritable facts over the imaginative work of writers, and Trethewey embodies this act of resistance in her own work. By placing her imagination within the text of the official document, Trethewey reshapes the truth of the document to include her own imagination. In this way, Trethewey’s memoir does not merely reproduce these materials but instead challenges their authority and asserts validity to imagination.

**Conclusion**

In *Memorial Drive,* Trethewey complies various artifacts embedded with the memory of her mother, creating a futuristic archive that engages in imaginative methods. Through her engagement with photographs, journal entries, and official documents, Trethewey simultaneously reveals the limitations of these materials while demonstrating how imagination allows for a deeper engagement with them. By engaging with archival materials in a way that prioritizes counter-memories and counter-narratives, Trethewey’s memoir embodied futurity, resisting dominant narratives of her mother and the South. Instead of simply recovering the past, Trethewey reimagines what memory work can do.

## CHAPTER TWO – THE HALSEY FAMILY ARCHIVE

### Introduction

In the summer of 2024, I asked all of my family members to bring any photographs they had of our family's matriarch, Annie Pearl Halsey, to our family reunion. I was suddenly in possession of several tote bags of photo albums and envelopes of developed film. My father, Dewayne Halsey, gave me a drawer that used to be a part of my Big Momma's dresser, full of baskets that held some of her belongings.


**Figure 1 - Annie Pearl Halsey's Dresser Drawer**

In Chapter 1, I read Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive* as an archive shaped by critical fabulation, a framework that allows for both recovering and reimagination of the past. Trethewey's engagement with archival materials such as photographs, journal entries, and official documents provide the basis for critical fabulation, where Trethewey reimagines history and the inner life of her mother. Building on my reading of Trethewey's memoir, this chapter extends the concept of critical fabulation to the creation of "The Halsey Family Archive," a digital archive that I use to explore how

imaginative archival methods can shape memory work in both literary and digital contexts. In doing so, I consider the intersections between personal narratives, archival curations, and the digital humanities. I pose the following questions:

- What possibilities open when reading a literary text alongside a digital archive?
- How does critical fabulation function as a methodological approach in digital archiving, particularly in the context of Black familial histories?

**Critical Fabulation in Practice**

Building on my earlier discussion of critical fabulation, a term coined by Saidiya Hartman, this chapter considers its implications for archival practice, particularly in relation to digital memory work. Hartman's concept of critical fabulation a method for encountering the various gaps, silences, and absences found within the archive. Furthermore, it challenges the boundaries of archival truth, proposing an imaginative method for narrating histories that have been silences or obscured. It is imperative to reiterate that Hartman does not suggest the creation of a *new* narrative that claims truth or authority over the archive. Instead of inventing a definitive historical account, Hartman advocates for a method that resists the totalizing authority of the archive.

This chapter engages with Hartman's work alongside scholarship on Black digital archives to consider how digital archives expand the possibilities of critical fabulation. Although digital archives can make possible new ways of engaging with Black history and narratives, these archives can also pose great harm. Jessica Marie Johnson in "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads" discusses the potential harm replicated in digital archival methods regarding transatlantic slavery. For example, Johnson points towards databases as "[reinscribing]

enslaved Africans' biometrics as users transfer the racial nomenclature of the time period (*négre, moreno, quadroon*) into the present and encode skin color, hair texture, height, weight, age, and gender in new digital forms, replicating the surveilling actions of slave owners and slave traders" (59-60). These problematic names are arguably given a new life when reproduced in the digital realm. Johnson reminds scholars in the field that no data is "neutral," and that it takes a conscious effort to be aware of underlying systems of oppression that may manifest and replicate in digital platforms. Issues such as these appear to be a growing concern in the field of digital humanities. The publication of *Debated in the Digital Humanities 2019* features a chapter titled, "Toward a Critical Black Digital Humanities," in which Safiya Umoja Noble proclaims, "we might also consider the degree to which our very reliance on digital tools, of the master or otherwise, exacerbates existing patterns of exploitation and at times even creates new ones" (27). Noble's allusion to Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" conveys the tension between using digital platforms for critical intervention and the risk of reinforcing the very systems they seek to challenge.

This tension also emerges in digital archival recovery work, where the attempt to retrieve lost or silenced narratives often emphasizes the impossibility of fully reconstructing them. Likewise, Black memoirs such as *Memorial Drive* operate within this same paradox. As Hartman concludes in "Venus and Two Acts," the "conjunction of hope and defeat define this labor and leave open its outcome" (14). Critical fabulation offers a means of confronting the silences and gaps, but it by no means solves them. In her memoir, Trethewey embodies this conjunction, as she assembles an archive of her mother's life while simultaneously recognizing the irrecoverable aspects of her story.

Digital archives, especially in the context of Black digital archives, raise distinct ethical and methodological questions. For example, how does digitization alter our relationship with historical materials? What possibilities yet risks arise when personal histories are curated online?

**Digital Archive Methodology**

Inspired by Trethewey's approach, my digital family archive incorporates a range of materials, including oral histories, photographs, and personal narratives, to construct a layered memory project. Furthermore, I embody Hartman's critical fabulation to go beyond the materials themselves, utilizing imagination as an archival method.

At the center of my archive is the matriarch of my family, Annie Pearl Halsey. She suffered from a car wreck at the age of 19, which severely incapacitated her. Growing up, I always wondered about my grandmother's life. She was always in my life, a symbol of our family, but I never felt that I had a grasp on her full story. I wondered about her life prior to the car accident, and I wondered if I would ever be able to stitch together the fragments I have of her life. As a younger child, I felt that the car accident limited my ability to hear her story *from her*. I felt called by the silences in her story. In a similar fashion to Trethewey in her memoir, I wondered how I might put together pieces of my grandmother sprawled across photographs and memories of her. This led me to imagine what a digital archive, centered around my grandmother, might look like. The employment of Hartman's critical fabulation proved to be a restorative process as I not only preserved bits of her memory digitally but utilized digital tools to imagine within the silences and absences of her narrative.

The punctum of this digital archival project, the "thing that pricks you, wounding you into recognition," is the old Panola house. This house symbolizes the "beginning" of my grandmother's story.

**Figure 2 - The Panola House**

To create "The Halsey Family Archive," I utilized the digital platform Omeka to create the digital archive. To go beyond preservation of these archival materials, I made use of Omeka's plugins to visually and digitally practice critical fabulation. As critical fabulation is inherently narrative and imaginative, I utilized 2 specific Omeka plug-ins to visually demonstrate. To embody narrative, I added the "Exhibit" plugin to my archive. This allows users to experience a curated exhibit of archival items. I used this plug in to create a narrative of my grandmother's life based on items found within the archive. Instead of interacting with the archival materials separately in "Items," the exhibit puts archival materials together, allowing users to experience the memory of Annie Pearl Halsey through a curation of photos, interviews, and narrative text.

In addition to the archival materials themselves, I practiced critical fabulation using the "Exhibit Image Annotation" plugin. This plugin allows annotations on top of

images within the archive. I utilize this plugin in two main ones. One, I annotate to visually represent my imagination beyond the materials. I ask questions, wonder, and narrate. I also use this plugin to include quotes from the interviews I conducted with my family members. These interviews provide context for the images and by including them on top of these images, I can make clear the link between them. This also disrupts any authoritative hierarchy between the archival items. In one space I include imagination, images, interviews, and quotes, all intertwined in one archival material – the image.

The creation of the archive was inherently collaborative. After completing a rough draft of the archive and its exhibit, I conducted user testing with members of my family. It was important to include them in its creation since they are the primary audience and subject matter of the archive itself. Furthermore, focusing on accessibility is an important tenant of digital humanities scholarship. Since this archive allows for two main methods of interaction, through the imaginative exhibit and the items themselves, user testing was necessary for its success.

In order to demonstrate the role of critical fabulation, I specifically interact with 5 photographs and 3 interviews. They are highlighted in the exhibit titled, “Imagination and Ancestral Memory in the Halsey Family Archive.”

Link to archive: https://halseyfamilyarchive.vt.domains/

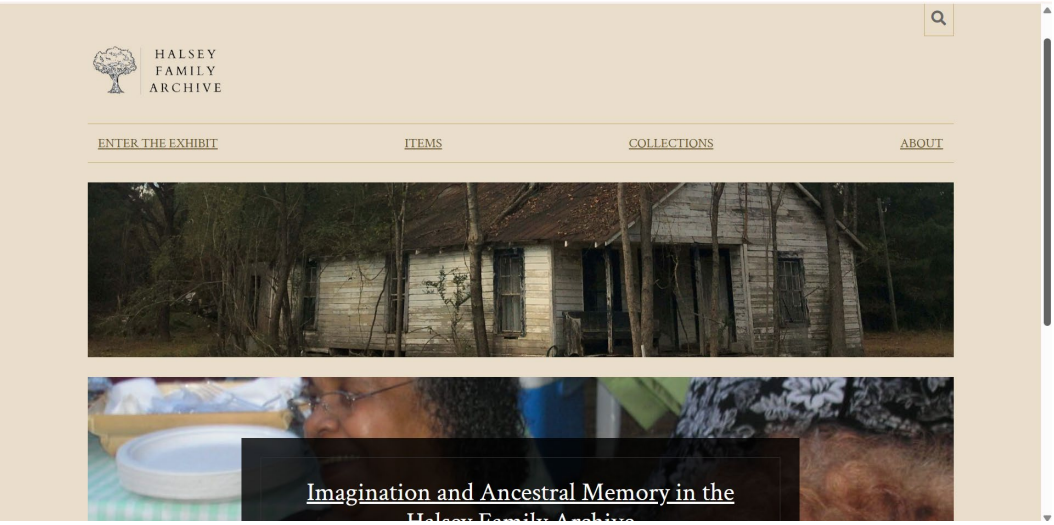


**Figure 3 - The Halsey Family Archive Home Page**

## CONCLUSION

This thesis project has explored how memory work is not merely an act of preservation but inherently an act of imagination, allowing for a futuristic vision for Black communities built upon continual engagement with one's past. By building upon Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation, I have demonstrated how the archival practices of Black women – both within published memoirs and digital spaces – create opportunities to reconstruct personal and communal narratives that have been historically fragmented and silences. I analyzed how Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive,* a memoir which I read as an archive, enacts critical fabulation weaving imagination with archival materials. Her text functions as a site of imaginative memory work, going beyond silences in her mother's narrative. This literary analysis extends into the digital realm as I have created a digital family archive, preserving the ancestral memory of my grandmother Annie Pearl Halsey, while simultaneously imagining within the silences and gaps in her narrative. By reading Trethewey's text alongside the creation of an imaginative archive, this project suggests that memory work, particularly for Black women, is necessarily an act of creative intervention; an act that resists the limitations of "factual" archives and historical records to instead embrace imagination as a means of continual engagement with the community's past.

The implications of this work extend beyond the literary and into larger conversations surrounding memory work in African American literature, African American studies, and the digital humanities. This project's interdisciplinary approach encourages scholars to consider how imagination, storytelling, archival research, the memoir form, and digital tools overlap to challenge dominant historical narratives and

offer new methods for engaging with Black memory and cultural history. This is no easy task. It can be frustrating as one continues to encounter the silences in the archival and historical record. It can be difficult to continue challenging said records through imagination. Yet, as Saidiya Hartman concludes in "Intimate History, Radical Narrative," "Intimate history, speculative thought, racial narrative, and critical fabulation are ways to create other kinds of story, and to refuse a view of Black life as only a "problem to be solved" (135). The task of engaging with Black archival materials through an imaginative lens opens up the possibilities of what archival research can look like. Perhaps the memoir and the archive does not merely preserve memory; it breathes, it lives, it imagines. It is through this imagination, engaging with memory as a continual process, that a new future becomes possible.

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