



## ***How I Got Over: The Staging of Gendered Blackness and Homelessness***

Kimberly Chantal Welch  
*University of Missouri-St. Louis*

### **Abstract**

In 2012, Theatre Lab collaborated with playwright Jennifer Nelson to write the play *My Soul Look Back and Wonder: Life Stories from Women in Recovery*, which is based on the stories of women residing at N Street Village, a recovery community that provides housing and services to homeless and low-income women in Washington, D.C. The creation of this play as well as the resulting performance at the Kennedy Center are the focus of the documentary *How I Got Over* (2014). The structure of the documentary paints a story of healing and recovery as the audience learns the women's backstories, community affirmations and emotional post-production family reunions, and the women's lives since the Kennedy Center performance. *How I Got Over* ends with a follow up with the women participants one year after the production. Throughout the follow-up coverage, one participant is markedly absent: Cheryl K. Barnes. In this essay, I inquire into Barnes' absence as a consequence of her being an unruly body, demonstrating how commonsensical representation of her and her fellow N Street Village residents -- as well as moments of their erasure -- highlight the limits or, at least, potential drawbacks of using historically white spaces and performance structures to illuminate Black subjectivities.

### **Bio**

Kimberly Chantal Welch is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She has a Ph.D. in Theater and Performance Studies from UCLA. With an emphasis on the African Diaspora, her research focuses on the intersections of performance, homelessness, and incarceration and the ways in which constructions of race, gender, and sexuality mediate how people navigate said sites of spatial dispossession. Her work has been featured in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, and *Lateral*, and her forthcoming publications include contributions to *The Methuen Drama Handbook to Theatre and Gender* as well as *Cultural Dynamics*.



There's always gonna be pockets of poverty, poor. And the word 'homeless' to me means 'not having a lease or a key.' I don't particularly care for the word. Actually, I try to use 'poverty' because poverty sorta encircles all of it. You know, the word homeless, [changes voice] 'Oh you're homeless', it's such a downer. You don't want people to feel down even when you're asking for help (*How I Got Over*, 2014).

— Cheryl K. Barnes, N Street Village resident and *How I Got Over* participant

In the summer of 2014, *How I Got Over* was released. This documentary follows the creation and performance of an original play about the experiences of primarily Black women currently residing at N Street Village, which is a recovery community that provides housing and services, including healthcare and employment, to homeless and low-income women in Washington, D.C. The project emerged as part of Theatre Lab's Life Stories Program. Theatre Lab, a nonprofit dramatic arts school, and their Life Stories Program in particular, exists within a nexus of organizations that work with marginalized and dispossessed communities through the medium of theatre to bring the resulting performance piece to a well-known stage. The company has partnered with N Street Village since 2007. However, it wasn't until 2012 that Theatre Lab brought work produced by N Street Village residents to the stage. That year, Theatre Lab collaborated with playwright Jennifer Nelson to write *My Soul Look Back and Wonder: Life Stories from Women in Recovery*, a play based on the stories of the women residing at the recovery centre. The creation of this play as well as the resulting performance are the focus of the documentary. As articulated on the official website for the film,

HOW I GOT OVER follows 15 formerly homeless and/or incarcerated women as they craft an original play, based on their harrowing true-life stories, to be performed one-night-only at The Kennedy Center. As observers of their creative



process, we bear witness to their transformations from victim to artist, and to the performing arts' capacity to heal trauma, create connection, and start a conversation (*How I Got Over*, 2014).

True to the official narrative of the film, the structure of the documentary paints a story of healing and recovery as the audience learns the women's backstories, witnesses community affirmations throughout the film and emotional family reunions post-production, and learns what the women have been up to since the Kennedy Center performance. This article turns to *How I Got Over* to analyse how the politics of representation play out when stories about gendered Black experience take place on the historically white stages of Western theatre and are transposed into documentary film. How does medium relate to disruptive depictions or recurring erasures of Black female subjectivity?

*How I Got Over* ends with a follow-up with the women participants one year after the production. Throughout the post-production coverage, one of the participants is markedly absent -- Cheryl K. Barnes. What happened to her? In the earlier parts of the film, Barnes is the only participant with substantial screen time framed as an unruly body. Although the film's closing scenes also leave out narratives of the lives of Caroline Dorsey, Jewel McNeill, Lurinda T. Lawson, Denise Seymore, Rose Shaw (although pictured during the graduation scene), Tacarra Wilkins, Tonya Stokes, Peggy Thomas, Petrina Thomas, and Linda Ann Wicker, Barnes' absence is markedly different. She represents the only antagonistic voice in the narrative structure of the film. Perhaps consequently, the audience never learns her one-year-later story. In what ways is Barnes' body particularly troubling to the documentary's constructed field of



vision? What does her troubling presence, and absence from the one-year-later follow-up, reveal about the common-sense(s) mobilizing the creation and production of the play and documentary? I open with this inquiry into Barnes' disappearance, for analysing the common-sensical representation of Barnes and her fellow N Street Village residents through cinematic syntax and story -- as well as moments of their erasure -- highlights the limits or, at least, potential drawbacks of using historically white spaces and performance structures to illuminate Black subjectivities. Using *How I Got Over* as a case study, I argue that these limits are the proclivity to reify stereotypes and narratives that naturalize Black poverty. Following this delineation, I turn to the unruly Black female body, as disruptive to the politics of visibility, to argue that her troubling presence demarcates said limits.

### **Common-Sense and Representation**

Throughout *How I Got Over*, Barnes, a Black woman, and her body are troubling to the transformative narrative articulated by the play, documentary, and accompanying press releases. *How I Got Over*'s cinematic syntax (shot relationships, cuts, pans, etc.) and story (speech and written text framing the film) draw upon common-sense images of Blackness and poverty. For Kara Keeling, common-sense 'refers simultaneously to a shared set of motor contrivances that affect subjective perception *and* to a collective set of memory images that include experiences, knowledges, traditions, and so on and that are available to memory during perception' (2007, p. 14, emphasis in original). When a person views a cinematic image, they draw on (largely) collective past encounters with that image and its likeness (i.e. common-sense memory-images)



to make sense of the image. This sense-making process is intricately tied to affect, which constitutes ‘those sensations and feelings that carve out a subjective perception in things’ (Keeling, 2007, p. 24). For many minority groups underrepresented in film, television, theatre, and the arts more generally, this frequently means the reification of stereotypes and their ‘affective residue’ as part and parcel of the violence of representation (Cavanagh, 2013, p. 287). As documentary, both *My Soul Look Back and Wonder* and *How I Got Over* utilize a realist epistemology: ‘[s]pectators come to a theatrical [and filmic, I would add] event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand’ (Reinelt, 2008, p. 9). In other words, the genre of the play and film attests to a mediated link between the document -- that is, the lives of the majority Black N Street Village residents -- and what is (re-)presented on stage/screen. Unfortunately, as I will show in this article, this ascription of ‘truth’ aids in the recycling of hegemonic common-sense imagery and discourses naturalizing Black precarity. While I largely focus on how *How I Got Over*’s filmic grammar and story -- and from here on the term ‘narrative’ will be used when referring to both cinematic syntax and text/speech -- caters to racist, heteropatriarchal common-sense despite seemingly benevolent intentions by the parties involved, I also am interested in moments in which that common-sense is troubled.

As Keeling argues, there are multiple common-senses (e.g. Black common-sense), such that the possibility exists for subjugated knowledges to disrupt hegemonic forms of common-sense. To that end, the second portion of this article focuses on such a moment of rupture -- when



Barnes' Black female body 'presents a problem within a field of vision structured by racialized and gendered markings' (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 109). Elsewhere in her text, Fleetwood argues that the visible Black body is troubling because the discourses of chattel slavery and capitalism cast it as such (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 18). In the scopic regime that reigned during transatlantic slavery and continues to persist in altered forms today, having visible signifiers of Blackness made one subject to subjugation based on a social construct. Perhaps best encapsulated by DuBois' (1994, p. 1) poignant question in his 1903 study *The Souls of Black Folk* -- 'How does it feel to be a problem?' -- I take the problematic presence of Blackness as a point of departure for my reading of the documentary.

Although not a rule of thumb, documentary in its various forms (e.g. theatre and film) frequently calls upon audiences to critically engage with politically charged topics. Through narrative, *How I Got Over* addresses gendered experiences of homelessness in Washington, D.C., the capital of the one of the most influential nations in the world. Black women are overrepresented in low-income and homeless populations in Washington, D.C. as well as nationally. One way that the relationship between Blackness, gender, and poverty circulates in the popular imaginary is through the image of the welfare queen, a term popularized by Ronald Reagan, which depicts low-income women of colour as gluttonous, lazy, and abusive of the welfare system. This image continues to find traction and critique in films like *Precious* (2009), and a variation of said relationship invokes the image of the drug-addicted mother as in *The Blind Side* (2009) and *Moonlight* (2016). As cogently put by Patricia Hill-Collins (2002, p. 5),



From the mammies, jezebels, slave breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinated place.

The recitation of stereotypical images of Black women functions to justify the oppression of real Black women by naturalizing their presence in precarious sites. The cinematic image of a Black woman living in poverty, whether that is a filmic image or a flesh-and-blood encounter, affirms common-sense memory-images seeded in the cinematic Black woman's socioeconomic status. In addition to images of the welfare queen, there also exists a slew of contemporary cinematic images depicting economically-precarious Black women who strive to improve their and their family's socioeconomic status, such as in the TV series *All American* (2018-) and the film *Dope* (2015). Based on its marketing as a story of recovery and transformation, one might tentatively place *How I Got Over* in this second category of cinematic images of Black women living in poverty. However, I am not interested in discerning 'positive' versus 'negative' imagery superficially indexed in the above sample categories, which in either case naturalize the economic precarity of Black women. Instead, I seek to foreground the rigor needed to disrupt hegemonic common-sense that exists *even in imagery meant to subvert it* in the popular representational field, in which Black women are always marked by excess or lack (Keeling, 2007, p. 80).

### ***How I Got Over* and Common-Sense**



The documentary opens with N Street Village participants walking backstage and heading to the mainstage for the performance. During this sequence, the audience of the film hears acting instructor Thom Workman in a voiceover thanking the women and giving a short pep talk. Following the voiceover, the camera briefly shows the opening scene of the play: on a lowly lit, blue-light-filtered stage, the women stand with arms encircling one another as vocalist and N Street Village resident LaJuana Clark soulfully leads the ensemble in the opening lyrics of Buzz Mauro's rendition of Aretha Franklin's 'How I Got Over.' Clark's singing of the lyrics 'How I got over/How did I make it over' in combination with body positioning and lighting create an intimate set that foreshadows the personal narratives to come. The film then cuts to a montage of images of Washington, D.C. at night -- a picture of the national monuments is immediately followed by several cuts to silenced and silent individual Black people on the street requesting aid. In juxtaposing the opening image of the women supporting one another with the individual homeless people on the street, the filmic syntax suggests the answer to LaJuana's 'How I did I make it over?' question: collectivity. Unlike the people briefly shown in the cuts, the N Street Village participants have a support system. This montage perhaps can be read also as a pointed critique of the U.S. government's neglect for Black, urban poor and the inequitable distribution of wealth in the country -- the state's failure to provide a support system for the economically precarious.

In her writings on race and geography, Ruth Gilmore argues that '[r]acism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized





and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of *political* distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs' (2002, p. 16, emphasis in original). By juxtaposing symbols of democracy with images of people living on the streets of the nation's capital, the documentary marks homelessness as a political and geographic issue, for physical proximity does not overcome the political obstacles of inadequate representation in Congress or the overrepresentation of Black Americans in the U.S. homeless population. Only 3% of U.S. Senators identify as African-American (Manning, 2020), whereas African-Americans make up 13% of the total U.S. population (*QuickFacts: United States*, 2019). African-Americans fare much better in the House of Representatives, with 52 voting members and 2 additional nonvoting delegates. Although the percentage of African-American House representation correlates with national demographics, Black Americans continue to be overrepresented in sites of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration. This illustrates that demographic equivalency does not necessarily lead to equitable legislation and the nonpartisan enforcement of said laws; affluent whites still makeup 73% of the House and 80% of Congress (Manning, 2020). For various reasons, including class privilege, (self-)identification as African-American or Black does not always correlate with public support for policies that benefit -- or at least do not disproportionately harm -- a substantial portion of this demographic. Nonetheless, it stands to reason that a larger representation of demographics whose socioeconomic status is most impacted by federal and state policies would lead to an increase in the push for more equitable



distributions of resources as well as reconsideration of punitive policies that have been proven to cause racial disparities in incarcerated and homeless populations.

In this light, and to return to *How I Got Over*, the syntactical relationship between images of national monuments and Black homeless people sharply articulates the failings of the U.S. political system and some of the localized consequences of said failure. The documentary suggests that the women of N Street Village are part of the collateral damage of a broken system, yet they can overcome systemic obstacles through collective processes. The affective grammar of the next such montage -- of ostensibly homeless individuals residing in Washington D.C. -- corresponds with Barnes' articulation of the affective politics of economic and social aid marked in the opening epigraph. The scene is filmed during the day. It features Black men playing basketball and images of degraded buildings and boarded up houses, all shown while Kirk Franklin's gospel song 'I Smile' plays. The juxtaposition of homeless individuals and desecrated structures with the resilient message of uplift in the music overlay -- which begins with N Street Village residents singing along in a moving van -- suggests that despite their surroundings and/or past, the N Street Village residents will be able to transform their lives by participating in the program and maintaining a positive outlook. The scene neatly maps onto the film's narrative structure, as articulated on its website: 'transformations from victim to artist.' However, the fact that only Black people are featured in depictions of Washington, D.C.'s homeless population also maps homelessness onto Black Americans, naturalizing Black urban poverty. This reinforces problematic narratives that fail to investigate the root causes of the overrepresentation



of Black people among homeless populations, specifically because Black people's presence within those communities is supported by commonsensical notions that to be Black is to be poor. In addition to drawing on frequently stereotypical memory-images circulating in popular media and written representations of Black women, homelessness, and racialized self-medication practices, when the audience views the N Street Village residents narrating their stories on and off stage about how addiction led them to the recovery centre, they are also presented with images of urban poverty in Washington, D.C. These images validate prominent narratives that imply that addiction is the prevailing cause of homelessness, rather than institutionalized racism and systemic oppression tied to capitalism. In other words, the cinematic images presented to the audience confirm the residents' culpability in their own dispossession while simultaneously commending the women for having the courage to share their stories and participate in the hard process of healing and self-transformation.

### **Barnes and An Alternative Common-Sense**

Through these images, the film fails to disrupt dominant depictions of Black women living in poverty. It is unable to realize the documentary's potential to illuminate alternate knowledges that push against hegemonic common-sense, except through momentary glimpses of such knowledge via Barnes. When Barnes makes a distinction between homelessness and poverty, as in the epigraph to this article, she both critiques dominant conceptions of home tied to legally recognized property relations as embodied in the 'American Dream' and marks capitalism as requiring the dispossession of others. To Barnes, 'there's always gonna be pockets of poverty,



poor' because global capitalism needs poverty to function. Indeed, the circulation of common-sense images that render Black people who are homeless culpable for their own circumstances serves to hide the neoliberal and capitalist reasons for homelessness. Barnes' epigraph suggests that the filmic narrative espoused in the opening scene is false. The system isn't broken. Instead, it functions exactly how it was designed to: to exploit and oppress certain groups according to market logics. The documentary fails to foreground this fact, and instead promotes working within a system not designed for the survival of the N Street Village participants. In addition, with the exception of the older Black woman who smiles at the camera, it is unclear if any of the people in either montage know that they're being recorded. I question whether consent was given or even sought, and if the individuals filmed were compensated for their contribution to the narrative structure of the film. If not, *How I Got Over* replicates the heterosexual, white male gaze that constructs Blackness as absence (hooks, 1992). In doing so, the documentary problematically treats the unnamed recorded individuals as scenery or props that help establish the setting: urban, Black poverty in Washington, D.C. Through its voyeuristic gaze, the documentary contributes to the erasure of Black, homeless people as individual subjects while paradoxically trying to highlight the subjectivities of N Street Village participants.

The use of close ups and medium shots throughout the documentary, as well as the filming of N Street Village residents' individual histories in geographic locations that represent safe space -- such as their room or outdoor spaces they frequent to think or creatively express themselves -- highlight an investment in representing the subjectivity and complexity of the



participants. As I have argued elsewhere, mediated and popular narratives about homeless individuals frequently map transparency onto the subjects' bodies, and in doing so, occlude the individuality and subjectivity of said individuals (Welch, 2020, pp. 52-60). *How I Got Over*, by contrast, spends time introducing most of the N Street Village participants, allowing the women to narrate an aspect of their story, whether that is in terms how they arrived at the recovery centre or their hopes and aspirations. These diverse shooting locations directly contrast with the sterile, empty theatre background that accompanies most of director Deb Gottesman's interview monologues. This juxtaposition frames Gottesman as an expert commentator rather than part of the N Street Village community and its experiences, which according to the documentary's narrative as illustrated by geographic signifiers, is tied to the specificities of Washington, D.C.'s urban landscape. Indeed, as theatre and performance scholar Janelle Reinelt argues, theatre and other live performance events 'have their most potent incarnations in a particular venue, for a particular community of spectators' (quoted in McAuley, 1999, p. 11).

*My Soul Look Back and Wonder* takes place in the Kennedy Center with a majority white, presumably middle to upper class audience. This demographic strongly contrasts with the N Street Village and Washington, D.C. residents highlighted in the film. During the first filmic focus on the venue, the documentary features a pan of the theatre's JFK statue, invoking the president's controversial relationship to civil rights and social programs. Despite the marketing of the women's stories as universal, locating place-based, gender-specific, and race-specific narratives on a historically white stage to an audience whose life experiences are divorced from



the performers allows Theatre Lab's project to forcibly articulate the women's stories as belonging on mainstream stages. Further, evidenced by the sold-out show and selling of the documentary, it illustrates that these narratives are commodifiable. Although the documentary emphasizes that it is in fact about the N Street Village residents, the framing of the performance through the lens of urban poverty and addiction undermine that effort, particularly given the documentary's failure to question how the primarily Black N Street Village residents were ushered into survival mechanisms that led to their spatial dispossession. This poverty-porn framing also suggests that the documentary is largely interested in the construction of a sellable narrative that validates Theatre Lab's drive to share the stories of the N Street Village participants. Despite Theatre Lab's clear investment in helping the women articulate their stories in a way that will resonate with the audience -- that is, through the creation of a performance -- at least one performer, Barnes, finds room for improvement in the resulting script.

Barnes' critique claims experience as a powerful, credible source of knowledge. While the rehearsal process is not the first time the audience encounters Barnes -- indeed, the scene of the opening epigraph takes place before the script is disseminated -- it is during the initial read-through of the script that Barnes moves from a critique of broad structures of oppression to a critique of Theatre Lab's interpretation of the N Street Village residents' experiences. When the participants read through the script, Barnes calls for edits. As the film cuts between shots of Barnes and Gottesman, the following dialogue takes place.



Barnes: There's something I'd like to change. [reads script] 'I went to my mother's funeral high.' You could probably say 'I was so high that I couldn't shed a tear as I looked at her in the ground.'

Gottesman: I'm writing it down.

Barnes: Yea, some of this needs to be changed.

Gottesman: Because?

Barnes: Because it doesn't fit with the story.

Gottesman: It doesn't fit the story. Okay, normally an actor gets no say. And you know, if you say, 'No, you know, I would never say that' it's like 'Oh well, say it.' You know, 'find a reason,' but this is really different because you created this piece so great, I got it, thanks (*How I Got Over*, 2014).

Although the women at N Street Village did participate in the creation of the play by sharing their stories, they did not actually create the play itself, since Nelson wrote the script based on her interpretation of the women's stories. Clearly, this is an interpretation that Barnes, and perhaps others as well, found lacking. In a corrective measure, Barnes rewrites the quote and alludes to more edits to come.

While one could argue that Barnes' call for change is specific to how Barnes herself might respond in said situation, a position that Gottesman appears to take up in her analysis of the situation, Barnes claims that the line doesn't fit the story, which is one of many stories of a Black woman's dispossession and the aftermath. As Barnes suggests, 'I went to my mother's funeral high' does not address magnitude or the affective and corporeal responses tied to self-medication, which themselves are at least partially engendered by material conditions produced by the carceral state. In a city in which African-Americans make up 49% of the population but almost 70% of the 18.6% of the city's population living below the poverty line, and women aged 25-34 and 18-24 are the two largest demographics living in poverty (*DataUSA*, 2016), Barnes'



claim to specificity in this moment stands in contrast to Theatre Lab's attempt to 'tell a pretty much universal story about how women can become homeless in this country' (*How I Got Over*, 2014). Washington, D.C.'s particularities condition engagement with spatial dispossession, and these particularities manifest differently -- albeit relatedly -- in diverse geographic sites. Barnes argues that the words written for the scene do not map onto the world of the play, which is arguably supposed to resemble the space and places inhabited by the participants. More simply, there is a disconnect between Barnes' and Nelson's understanding of gendered and classed homelessness -- and self-medicated responses to said dispossession -- in Washington, D.C. For Barnes, first-hand experience in this geography has generated an archive from which she can draw in her performance of the scripted scene.

With this in mind, what if -- instead of reading Barnes' response as simply an actress questioning her character's response to the *mise en scène* -- we think of it as marking/mapping a Black geography, a repertoire of Black experience, that is not illustrated in the initial draft? In her rewriting of the script, Barnes disrupts the actor-director relationship Gottesman delineates during the read-through. Although Gottesman concedes that Barnes is entitled to make script edits since Barnes provided her story as source material for the script, Gottesman does so only after stating that 'normally an actor gets no say.' With that statement, Gottesman references a long history of conventional Western theatre in which the director makes most of the decisions for a production. However, the archive that Gottesman engages does not match the structure of the work that the Life Stories Program seemingly attempts to create: one of 'dialogical





performance’, a process of negotiation in which entities converse in order to discover together the best possible usage of each other’s respective resources to address a shared issue of importance (Conquergood, 1985). Considering that one of the articulated goals of *How I Got Over* is to help participants heal, the project should be interpreted in a performance tradition that privileges the experiential and embodied knowledge of the participants over strict actor-director roles. If the documentary project is in fact invested in ethically depicting the N Street Village participants, their stories, and the ways in which primarily Black women become homeless in the United States, it is not enough to simply present the stories on stage or screen. As cogently argued by Evelyn Hammonds, ‘[V]isibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen’ (quoted in Keeling, 2007, p. 11). The ideological frameworks upholding hegemonic common-sense have to be challenged in order for alternative common-sense, like the one indexed in Barnes’ critiques, to become intelligible. In her response to Barnes, Gottesman draws on an archive and epistemology that do not match the conditions of the performance and more importantly, the expression of Barnes’ narrative. In this way, neither the play nor the documentary provide space for a complex depiction of gendered and classed homelessness.

The documentary concludes with the Kennedy Center performance and post-production follow-up with the cast. The documentary’s concluding section begins with some of the same images that opened the film. Prior to lights up, the audience of the film witnesses what happens



behind the scenes -- the production crew creating the set, the women's dressing room prep, and the performers' procession to the stage -- as well as a shot of the show's attendees. In Western theatre traditions, the audience generally does not have access to backstage unless participating in a tour temporally divorced from the live performance. However, despite this rarity, the popularity of regional theatre tours evidences interest in seeing the material conditions that produce the magic that is the production. As articulated by Alice Rayner, 'Those tours offer a sense of privileged access while they give tourists contact with the inside spaces of theater. That contact with the real scene fulfills a certain kind of desire to see what is normally invisible and to be part of the scene of the real thing' (2006, p. 141). *How I Got Over* entices this 'certain kind of desire' by showing how the practical elements of the theatre enable the audience to access the mediated and lived experiences of the participants. This framing and emphasis on 'the real' blurs the line separating performer from their character, projecting a narrative of authenticity. While it is impossible to deduce how each spectator interpreted the performance, 'the performance provides a good deal of guidance about how to do this' (McAuley, 1999, p. 35); so, too, does the performance's marketing. Encapsulated in the film description, *How I Got Over* and *My Soul Look Back and Wonder* are supposed to be seen as harrowing yet palatable real-life stories about the resilience of victimized women. Since the popular imaginary is oversaturated with images naturalizing Black women's precarity, the onus of representing the N Street Village participants outside the realm of cliché falls on the directors and playwright. Unfortunately, both the play and documentary fall short in doing so.



## Conclusion

In offering this critique, I am not discounting theatre and the arts' ability to help people deal with trauma and heal or the work the N Street Village participants put in. Nor do I want to negate the fact that by bringing *My Soul Look Back and Wonder* to the Kennedy Center, Theatre Lab actively contributed to the representation of underrepresented and frequently marginalized voices and experiences on the mainstream stage. However, the process that enabled the women to perform to a sold-out, majority white, middle to upper class audience and have that journey documented and subsequently screened was dependent upon a racialized and gendered narrative of victimization. This narrative of self-induced precarity and resilience does little to elucidate either the complexity of the N Street Village participants' lives or the assemblages that funnel and keep women of colour in this particular site of spatial dispossession. While the documentary names the problem of urban poverty in the nation's capital and allows participants to narrate how their personal experiences led them to addiction and homelessness, it does not interrogate the systemic issues that mitigate said experiences and ways to cope with trauma induced by the conditions of a racist, capitalist state.

To conclude, I'd like to briefly return to the question that opened this article: What happened to Barnes? What if, much in the same way that Barnes saw a disconnect between Nelson's depiction of her character and her real-life experiences, Barnes is not featured in the conclusion of the film because her one-year-later did not fit into the film's narrative of transformation and progress? If this supposition proves true, then rather than bearing witness 'to



the performing arts' capacity to heal trauma, create connection, and start a conversation', we witness the arts' ability to occlude, erase, and leave out the stories of Black women and their experience, when those experiences do not fit within constructed narratives. These occlusions serve as cautionary tales for the digital capturing of institutional diversification projects that -- despite seemingly benevolent intentions -- fail to recognize how without careful attention, they could in fact be contributing to the erasure of the very communities they seek to support.



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